

People behind the stats

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Unit

Staff of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Unit



The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Unit (ATSIHWU) started in 2003 with one person and has expanded into one of the largest units at the AIHW with 22 staff members.

'The work on issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is important and challenging but very rewarding', said Dr Al-Yaman.

'The work program has expanded to include Indigenous housing and a broad range of health and welfare issues.

'Through my work I meet a lot of people who are also passionate about this work and are fun to work with.'

I am privileged to do something that I really like doing, and feel passionate about the work that I believe will make a difference.

The ATSIHWU focuses on analyses and reporting on the health and welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Unit's work includes data development, work on improving data quality, collection and reporting of data on health status and determinants of health, and collection of data for program evaluation. This is in addition to the collection of primary health care and other data to assess the quality of service delivery and improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients using health services.



Fadwa Al-Yaman

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Unit head Dr Fadwa Al-Yaman was awarded a 2008 Public Service Medal. Dr Al-Yaman has a background in immunology and health population and was recognised for outstanding public service in improving the accuracy and reliability of the data on Indigenous Australians contained in information collections for health, housing and community services.

The Unit analyses and reports on the health and welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

'The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is one of our most important publications', said Dr Al-Yaman.

This publication has been produced every two years in collaboration with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It presents the most up-to-date information on important issues such as employment, income, education, housing and homelessness, health status, mortality, disability and ageing, mothers and children, risk factors and access to health services and community services.

'It compares the status of Indigenous people with that of the non-Indigenous population', said Dr Al-Yaman.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework* report is another important publication that the Unit produces every two years.

The Unit produced the biennial report *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in collaboration with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).*

The publication reports against 70 measures covered by three tiers—health status and health outcomes, determinants of health status, and health systems performance. Trends over time are presented to help policy makers monitor progress and contribute to future policy, and improve planning and program delivery.

The Unit is setting a cracking pace with 14 projects on the go at present, including four major projects—the Healthy for Life project, the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) Child Health Check Initiative (CHCI) project, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework project and Improving Sexual Health in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth project.

Closing the gap in life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is one of the government's key commitments.

Healthy for Life is a program funded by the Australian Government's Department of Health and Ageing Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health which focuses on child and maternal health and chronic disease. The AIHW is responsible for data development, analysis and reporting. Data are submitted from primary health care services participating in the Healthy for Life program through a web-based information system.

The NTER CHCI project has recently expanded to include more than the initial task of data entry, analysis and reporting of the Child Health Check forms produced as a result of the NT Intervention. The project now also includes the electronic transfer of CHCI data, chart review data collection, dental services data collection and audiology services data collection.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework* report is due out this year, and work is continuing on the extensive list of subject areas covered in this biennial publication.

The aim of the newest project on Improving Sexual Health is to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth accessing testing and treatment services for sexually transmissible infections, as well as to reduce the level of risk behaviour among young people and contribute to the development of best practice approaches.

Staff in the Unit are also involved in various national committees, including the National Advisory Group on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Information and Data, which is part of the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Officials Network, the Prisoners Health Information Group, Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Indigenous Working Group, Child Health Check Memorandum of Understanding Management Group and

the Steering Committee for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework report.

Dr Al-Yaman also chairs the Data Development Reference Group for Healthy for Life and the Steering Committee for Best Practice Guidelines on Indigenous Identification.

The Unit works closely with the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health in the Department of Health and Ageing, the ABS, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage working group for the Productivity Commission, the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services, and Aboriginal primary health care services involved in the Healthy for Life program.

The Unit also collaborates with the Darwin-based Menzies School of Health Research, the National Perinatal Statistics Unit at the University of New South Wales, the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research at the University of New South Wales, the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance—Northern Territory and various other state and territory government departments.

'The staff bring a wealth of experience from many years working in the community sector, other government departments and with various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations', stated Dr Al-Yaman.

'Their qualifications range from bachelor degrees in psychology, science, social science, anthropology, sociology, English, Indigenous studies and demography to graduate diplomas in epidemiology and population health to PhDs in biochemistry, statistics and mathematics.'

If Dr Al-Yaman had extra time and resources, she would like to do more work with university-based researchers, and there is potential for future collaborative work with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. ■