

“Strength to Strength; Transformative ideas, people and systems”

Local solutions to universal wicked problems on nationally shared principles

Hilton Hotel Melbourne Victoria September 15th 2014

Good Morning,

I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this country and their elders past and present. I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak with you today and thank Bill for his, as always, thoughtful welcome to country. I would like to acknowledge Sonya from Anglicare, South Australia.

I would like to acknowledge members of the Anglicare community and your efforts for human dignity and wellbeing. I would like to acknowledge Fred Chaney, the elder who will speak after me and who has spoken with decency and common sense on these issues for longer than I can remember. Fred has always been respected in the Aboriginal community. He is seen as a friend and as someone with the long term and personal commitment to justice for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, as well as being a man of letters, democracy, diplomacy and decency.

In addressing your conference theme “Strength to Strength: Ideas that transform” let us not forget that ideas like “dignity”, “decency” and “equality” are some of the strongest and most transformational ideas of all time.

They require constant renewal, reaffirmation and reapplication.

These ideas are at once old fashioned and new-fangled, established and transformational. Let us also recall that our society is always transforming, sometimes slow, sometimes quickly but always changing. Sometimes we need to work hard to keep those elements of our society we wish to retain. We need to participate in the dialogue.

I'd like to talk today about some of the understandings we need to share to build the relationships and sustain the partnerships required to transform our situation and our society. There are transformative forces active in our society right now. If we do not develop and change we could be swept away by these forces. If we want to succeed in influencing our society we need to do so in a thoughtful and organised way.

I'd like us to think carefully about the acknowledgement of country and about the elders past and present. We are acknowledging a human relationship with land. We are being grateful for the care and responsibility for the land which our elders have carried out so that we can benefit from the wellbeing that depends on a productive

natural world and a positive relationship with it. It is an acknowledgement of these people who are on and of this country and the relationship to and knowledge of this country.

Historically, the relationship that Aboriginal people had with land is local. Partly because you could only travel over so much country and partly because you need to know country and its nature very well in order to make a living out of it and keep it living. Although there were times of hardship Aboriginal people thrived in their country.

At first contact the life expectancy was the same for both groups of people. Descriptions of Aboriginal people from that time are of healthy robust people in healthy and thriving communities.

Aboriginal people in Victoria developed about 25 languages, groups of people with critical population to produce their own language and a relationship with country that was significantly different and intimate as to tie those people to that country by knowledge, by story and by survival. As you can imagine people are also tied to their country by love

Local knowledge is important. Local relationships and circumstances are important. While all of VACCHO's members are driven by common aspirations of health and community and are part of a State and National peak organisation, they are each embedded in the local country and the communities in which they live. Local Aboriginal Community Control is fiercely defended by our communities. For VACCHO and each of our members Aboriginal Culture affects everything we do.

While we can share and be strengthened by universal and common visions and values, how we are going to achieve them will depend on local factors working together.

This can be a challenge for Aboriginal Community Organisations in Victoria, or in any given local area like Melbourne. Peak organisations can be challenged by the balance between local autonomy and State or National leadership.

The one size fits all does not work in Aboriginal Affairs. The different experience of Aboriginal communities in each of the early colonies and in each local language group is profound and shapes the people in them. The different experience of each of the Aboriginal language group in Victoria is unique and influences their members to this day.

Victoria for instance has no "great dividing range", it was not a harsh desert climate, it has good productive soils and abundant wildlife if you knew how to manage and harvest it. Victoria with its rich soils and moderate climate was the sort of place people wanted to live. And I should know my people have been wanting to live here for more than 40,000 years. When the Europeans, like the Irish side of my family, arrived they wanted to live in a place with good soil, abundant life, a nice climate. So they did. In large numbers.

Without a great dividing range there was nothing to stop the new arrivals and their ecosystem changing hooved animals spreading out through Victoria. The sniff of gold made them come in great numbers and in less than half a century, two generations, Victoria went from a Koori homeland for over twenty five language groups some with stone houses and permanent fish farming infrastructure to land occupied by a new group of people who were strange to it.

One of the results of this rapid and universal settlement is that there is almost no land in Victoria which qualifies for native title, as it has all been under some claim, lease or title by the colonists. Victorian Aboriginal people were rapidly, brutally and universally dispossessed of their land and because of the way the native title law is structured we have no legal claim to it.

The experience of Victorian Aboriginal peoples is unique. The stories of individual groups within Victoria are also unique. The Gunditjamarra, my mob, had a different language, different belief systems, lived on different country and had a different experience to the Wathaurong to the east. The Victorian Aboriginal language groups had a different experience to the Northern Territory groups or the Western Australian groups.

Also the colony of Victoria acted differently than the colony of Queensland, of NSW, Tasmania and so on. The colony and later the State of Victoria differed in its Aboriginal Affairs policies but also in its health and social services, land management, law and order, education, employment and so on. There is no universal experience of being Aboriginal. The experience of being Aboriginal is inherently geographical.

Prior to settlement, at times and places of biological plenty, like the bogong moth harvest in the Victorian alps, egg harvesting or mutton bird season, many Aboriginal language groups could come together. These gatherings were important opportunities for trade, feast and ceremony.

The diversity of experience is significant and has profound impact on where you meet people and where conversations, Real in depth conversations, real relationships, with real people begin.

When you begin these conversations it is important to understand yourself and the person you are conversing with in context. It is very respectful and effective to do your research or your thoughtfulness in approaching individuals and subjects.

This will include understanding your own and your organisations history. What role did they play in the stolen generations which affected 70% of Victorian Aboriginal families? How might this be seen to this day by those affected and their children? Victoria has the highest rates of child removal of any colony or state.

The Koori equivalent of “Hello what is your name and what do you do?” is “What is your name and who are your mob? Or Where are you from?”

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, or ACCHOs, were established by members of the community on a volunteer basis by people who saw a basic need for health services and a gap in access to those services. It was motivated by many things including a sadness at the poor health of community members and the institutional racism and poor treatment people experienced attending mainstream health services. They didn't set up a health taxi service, they didn't just take people to existing services. They saw a need to establish a space that was recognised as an Aboriginal land and to invite doctors to practice in it, to develop health workers from within the community members and invite community in for health.

The Aboriginal health services were also established for positive reasons, a positive assertion of identity and culture, of right and health.

Early Aboriginal health services saw the importance of these health relationships happening, on country that is Aboriginal. This can help balance the power in the relationships. In Victoria an Aboriginal community controlled health service may be the only Aboriginal defined and controlled space in a Koori person's life, the only place that celebrates Aboriginality, One of the few public spaces where we are culturally safe.

Racism is a shared experience of Aboriginal people, as homophobia is for the gay community or sexism is for women or as poor people experience class. It is experienced by Aboriginal people if they are the celebrated Australian of the year or if they are the ignored, poor and marginalised.

When Victorian Aboriginal people first established our own health services we had been dispossessed and dispersed for over 100 years. We had poor health from poverty, from racism, from dispossession.

To this day Aboriginal people experience racism, sometimes from people on the street, sometimes from institutions or officials. This happens to the point where some Aboriginal people expect it, anticipate it, try to save their children from it, avoiding contact with mainstream services and public spaces. Some people even deny their Aboriginality or play it down.

Aboriginal Health Services have been innovators in health service delivery. Improvements in services for Aboriginal patients such as client centred services, coordinated and integrated services, culturally sensitive services are good for all health system users. These were pioneered by ACCHOs.

One of the elements unique to the Aboriginal Community Health sector is the definition of health to be a whole of life cycle consideration, to include spiritual, social and emotional elements In addition to the physical. This is now thought to be very important for human health across the population backed by a growing amount of research. Healers of the spirit.

Like many sections of the community services sector Aboriginal health services are poor. They lack the resources and investment required to do their job to the degree they would like. They are resource poor, they are time poor, they are human resource poor and they are infrastructure poor. This can make engagement and the development of new partnerships difficult.

In developing relationships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services it is important to understand the local history and to understand the needs of the community and the contribution you can make to one another and together to the community.

This can be a long term process.

It is hard to make universal guidelines or textbook steps in this diverse environment but each organisation can make a clear public commitment to Aboriginal justice such as signing the 'Statement of intent to close the gap on Aboriginal health'.

Each organisation can develop a 'Reconciliation Action Plan' with the emphasis being on action. This can be a guide to the steps local organisations can make to build and maintain partnerships. Consider the benefits to your organisation of a partnership with an Aboriginal organisation.

Does your organisation have specific 'Aboriginal' targets in its strategic plan? Does it have targets for Aboriginal employment, service users or board membership? Does Anglicare include Aboriginal elements, partnerships or examples in its advocacy?

If you are applying for funds for programs to serve Aboriginal people are you competing for funds with an Aboriginal organisation?

Organisations can ensure all of their services are culturally safe for Aboriginal clients and staff.

If an Anglicare service has Aboriginal service users there is natural constituency to engage. Does your service know if the service users who visit each day identify as 'Aboriginal' ? (The Victorian government has a poor record of data collection of the Aboriginality of its service users.) A local Aboriginal health service is also a natural partner. Perhaps a 'Memorandum of understanding' is useful in articulating the relationship with the Aboriginal partner organisations.

Are there joint projects which can assist the Aboriginal community and build your organisation? Where should they be based? What are the needs of the Aboriginal organisation? Could it be Board support? Food co-op? Staff exchange? Infrastructure support? Advocacy support? Community Development? Oral Health? Could it just be a peer to peer support between CEOs? Or Boards?

There is much we can do together. There is much we can do in local service delivery and there is much we can do in joining our voices to address the causes of poverty, injustice and inequality.

Ultimately in the same way that all politics is local so all relationships are local. All relationships are also personal and require trust, commitment and time.

We share many principles in common. Some of our shared challenges and priorities are referred to as 'wicked' problems. There is much we can learn from one another. Bringing our local experiences together into forums and organisations such as this one we can develop a consensus.

There are many values in Aboriginal community control which are values shared across the Australian society.

When we join our voices together we can make some loud statements and can ask some very loud questions?

There is a great need to work together. At a time when many policies of many political parties can be seen as ignoring nature, individualising people and limiting social movement, sustaining poverty and entrenching inequality, investing in capital and not in community, when there is not a commitment to evidence based justice reinvestment, when elections are influenced by donors money rather than best policy it is only by working collectively that we can ensure national policies are just, equal and the nation reflecting our better selves.

Together we can ask simple questions which hold policies and parties to account. Does the latest proposal or pronouncement promote dignity, enhance decency or increase equality?

These are significant challenges. They will require community building, bridge building, relationship building. We must make these efforts we must acknowledge this country locally and nationally and the responsibilities we have as custodians for this country and its generations.

So I encourage you to go back to the country where you live. Make relationships with the country and people who have lived there forever.

In closure a good relationship with Aboriginal people and organisations reflects your living principles.

We can share and boost our shared values.

We can hold governments and public policy to account.

We can do things together that we cannot do alone.

We can do better than we have done in the past

Success of these relationships transforms each of us.

Travel safely, travel well and travel together. Thank you