

Health Equity Strategy 2024

Year In Review

A snapshot on activities and initiatives being delivered by TCHHS



Rex O'Rourke

Health Service Chief Executive



Natasha Fretwell

A/Executive Director Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health

As we reflect on the past year, we are proud to share the significant strides we have made in our Health Equity Strategy at Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Service. Our commitment to delivering culturally respectful and responsive healthcare remains unwavering, and we have achieved significant progress.

Returning birthing services to Weipa, building the renal dialysis unit in Kowanyama and opening the redeveloped Thursday Island Hospital stand as milestones in our journey.

We would like to extend our gratitude to our community, staff and key stakeholders. Your contributions have been instrumental in our journey towards health equity. While we have made significant progress, we acknowledge that there is a long way to go. With your continued support and commitment, we are confident we will reach our shared goals of better health care outcomes.

Listening and responding to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is fundamental to achieving health equity and

sovereignty. The insights, experiences, and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are helping to shape our health services to better support the needs of the community. This collaborative approach ensures that our services are responsive and reflective of the communities we serve.

The progress outlined in the following pages showcases our achievements and the ongoing efforts. Together, we are working to eliminate racial discrimination, increase access to healthcare services, influence the social, cultural, and economic determinants of health, deliver sustainable and culturally responsive healthcare, engage with communities, and strengthen our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health workforce.

As we move forward, let us continue to build on our successes and learn from our challenges. Together, we can create a health service that is equitable, culturally safe, and empowering for all.

Thank you for your dedication and commitment to this important work.

2024 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health at a glance*

15,083



Emergency presentations - 5% increase

5,116



Hospital admissions - 13% decrease

88,799



Outpatient appointments - 10% increase

“ We need data transparency to keep the community informed, which allows for better decision making. ”

Community yarn participant

68.9%



of people referred for Mental Health Care identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander - 1% increase

94%



of children aged 0-6 years are immunised - stable

*The statistics for 2024 are compared against TCHHS's performance from the previous year



Deliver Sustainable, Culturally Safe, and Responsive Healthcare Services

Culture is central to health independence and wellbeing in the Torres and Cape region.

This year, TCHHS celebrated NAIDOC Week, Mabo Day, and other cultural events. Connecting Elders and Traditional Owners with our workplaces and patients is part of journey to foster trust and deepen our relationships with our communities.

Cultural Practice Program

The Cultural Practice Program is designed to increase staff knowledge and enhance understanding that can be applied to working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healthcare. We proudly announce that over 1,000 staff members completed Cultural Competency Training to enhance their cultural capability to deliver culturally safe healthcare services.

“Connection to family, community and culture is central to one’s sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing.”
Community yarn participant

Delivered

745



introduction to cultural practice sessions.*

Had a completion rate of

90.7%



across the TCHHS workforce.*

*As at December 2024

Image: NAIDOC celebrations

Influence the Social, Cultural, and Economic Determinants of Health

TCHHS collaborates with our health partners on improving health and wellbeing by addressing social determinants like housing and preventive healthcare. We actively engage stakeholders to influence and improve health services.



Image: Badu residents May and TJ mixing cleaning products with their children

The Safe and Healthy Homes program on Badu, which began in 2022, continued to work with 50 Badu families in ensuring there was increased education on the connection between home living environment to the health of their families.

Bringing together housing officers, environmental health workers and Primary Health Care Teams, the program focuses on the importance of healthy living practices identified as integral to maintaining good health:

- Bathing every day to keep skin strong and healthy.
- Washing clothes, bedding and towels on a regular basis for good hygiene.
- Ensuring all plumbing is working to remove waste water safely from the home.
- Maintaining good hygiene practices when preparing and storing food in the kitchen.

- Managing risks associated with unwell household members and visiting family and friends.
- Managing pest presence within the home and maintaining the health of family pets.
- Practicing good hygiene essential to support the health of their family. Improving airflow within the home and reducing the presence of irritants such as mould and dust.
- Reducing potential skin injuries around the home and treating cuts and sores early to reduce infections and disease.

“Health and wellbeing... recognises the importance of holistic care. Having good health incorporates having access to the right resources”
Community yarn participant

Actively Eliminating Racial Discrimination and Institutional Racism

TCHHS reviewed recruitment practices to align with best practice standards, improving and sustaining employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The recruitment report offers recommendations that emphasise cultural awareness, respect, and inclusivity, aiming to create culturally safe workplaces that support diversity and the growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce.

Bukal Consultancy audited TCHHS using the racism matrix, a key tool for Health Equity Legislation to measure and address institutional racism. Compared to the 2017 audit results, TCHHS has significantly reduced institutional racism.



“I hope one day we will be able to see a society free of racism.”
Community yarn participant

Image: NAIDOC celebration

Increase Access to Healthcare Services

TCHHS strives to provide holistic, accessible, community-based healthcare and increase access to health services aligned with community needs to enhance patient experiences and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In 2024, TCHHS made significant strides in enhancing healthcare to the Torres and Cape communities. Key among the advancements was the reopening of the Weipa Birthing Suite (See story below), which will support up to 50 births annually, allowing mothers to uphold the cultural tradition of Birthing On Country.

TCHHS also bolstered its diagnostic capabilities by installing new CT scanners at Thursday Island and Weipa Hospitals. Medical imaging provides essential services such as X-rays, for patients to stay On Country for their healthcare assessment and treatment rather than travelling to Cairns.

In another significant achievement, a new 4-chair renal dialysis unit has been established at the Kowanyama Primary Health Care Clinic. This unit now supports up to 28 patients weekly, delivering dialysis care locally and minimising the need to relocate for treatment.

Access to healthcare saw further improvement with the introduction of the Pop-Up Palliative Care Service, which ensures community members can spend their final days On Country, surrounded by comfort and familiarity.

TCHHS has increased surveillance and preventive measures for Acute Rheumatic Fever (ARF) and Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD). By ensuring patients receive their LA Bicillin (antibiotic) injections more consistently, health outcomes have improved, with 55% receiving half and 28% receiving most (more than 80%) of the necessary antibiotics.

TCHHS demonstrated remarkable resilience and commitment to community care in response to natural disasters. Following Cyclone Jasper, a temporary Primary Health Care facility was swiftly constructed in Wujul Wujul within just 60 days, reinstating essential healthcare services to the affected area.

Through these multiple initiatives, TCHHS has expanded the accessibility and quality of healthcare while also reinforcing the importance of cultural traditions and community-based care. TCHHS collective efforts have made a tangible difference in the lives of many, securing better health outcomes and strengthening our communities.



Reopening of Weipa Birthing Service

Weipa Hospital marks a significant milestone with the return of birthing services after almost 25 years. The newly reinstated service supports up to 50 births annually, allowing mothers in Cape York to access maternal services On Country. This initiative honours the tradition of birthing On Country, fostering cultural continuity and a stronger bond for mothers and their babies with their land and ancestors. TCHHS's commitment ensures families experience birthing services as close to home as possible.

“The ability to live On Country and have access to services and opportunities no matter where we live.”

Community yarn participant



New Renal Dialysis Unit for Kowanyama Primary Health Care Clinic

The new 4-chair renal dialysis unit at Kowanyama Primary Health Care Clinic is a major step forward, supporting up to 28 patients each week. Dale Josiah, a father of four from Kowanyama, has kidney disease. Last year, he and his entire family were forced to relocate to Cairns for his dialysis treatment. Dale, a proud Aboriginal man, is deeply passionate about his community. The past few years have been challenging for him and his family, but the new renal unit means he can now receive dialysis treatment in Kowanyama.

Patients like Dale express their joy about returning to their Country and seeing pictures of their community, underscoring the importance of delivering accessible healthcare services. Such initiatives make a significant difference to families in Cape communities, ensuring they can receive culturally and clinically safe care in their local community healthcare setting.

Co-Design, Deliver, Monitor, and Review Health Services Together

TCHHS is dedicated to cultural governance and health equity, and actively seeks input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Health Equity Committee and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Governance Committee ensure diverse representation. The two regional sub-committees support the TCHHS Executive Leadership Team and Health Service Boards in achieving health equity.

We prioritised opportunities for community leaders and partner organisations to enhance cultural governance within health services. Formalised partnerships through a Memorandum of Understanding with 13 Councils, ensured ongoing engagement and accountability. Additional agreements were established with partner organisations, including the Royal Flying Doctors Service, Northern Peninsula Area Family and Community Services, Torres Health, and Apunipima Cape York Health Council.

“We have ownership of our healthcare can make our own decisions... Our collective voices are heard in service planning”

Community yarn participant



Image: Executives and directors learning to weave on Thursday Island.

Strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce

TCHHS is proud to be Queensland Health's highest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in leadership positions.

In 2024, we expanded our workforce with key positions, including Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Profession and Manager of Health Worker Service (Northern Sector). Marita Sagigi was appointed Executive General Manager in the North, the first Torres Strait Islander to be appointed to the role.

TCHHS promotes health career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through initiatives like the Deadly School Program and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cadetship Program, supported by over \$1 million in funding. The First Nations Program focuses on growing career paths, with 20 participants attending three programs this year across key Torres and Cape communities.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Deadly School Start Program

The Deadly Start program provides School-Based Traineeships across Thursday Island, Bamaga, Weipa, and Cooktown, leading to a Certificate III in Health Service Assistance. This fully funded program currently supports ten trainees (one in Bamaga, two on Thursday Island, three in Weipa, and four in Cooktown) and will expand to 24 by 2025. The Deadly Start program is a key step in fostering a strong and capable future workforce for TCHHS, offering students a meaningful pathway into healthcare careers.

“We want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to have opportunities to work in the health sector and have career pathways.”

Community yarn participant

Images left and right: Deadly School Start Program – students at Cooktown Hospital; Career Up Here – Tagai State College on Thursday Island.

The Journey Ahead...

TCHHS is continuing its Community Yarns in 2025 and we ask for your help. With support and insight from our communities, we can shape the next phase of our Health Equity Strategy together.

There are opportunities to support TCHHS as we start to rebuild our Primary Health Care Centre at Wujal Wujal, begin the work on returning birthing services to Cooktown, redevelop our Primary Health Care Centres on Moa Island and develop comprehensive population and cultural profiles for every community. Local community insights are crucial for identifying specific health needs and challenges, tailoring the HES to address health priorities and allocate resources effectively.

Come forward and join us on the journey towards Health Equity.

