

Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy

Summary This Policy Directive provides a summary of cultural activities including Welcome to Country, Acknowledgment of Country, displaying flags and smoking ceremonies. Engagement in Aboriginal cultural activities ensures Aboriginal values, strengths and differences are recognised, respected and celebrated. All NSW Health staff are required to adhere to this policy and incorporate Aboriginal cultural activities into their business.

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ABORIGINAL CULTURAL ACTIVITIES POLICY

PURPOSE

The Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy provides information and guidance to support NSW Health facilities and its staff in understanding, organising and engaging in Aboriginal cultural activities.

Supporting and engaging in Aboriginal cultural activities enables NSW Health staff to ensure Aboriginal cultural values, strengths and differences are recognised, respected and celebrated. It is the responsibility of all NSW Health staff to adhere to this policy and incorporate Aboriginal cultural activities into their business wherever and whenever opportunities are available.

MANDATORY REQUIREMENTS

All parts of the NSW Health system (including the NSW Ministry of Health (the Ministry), local health districts, specialty networks and pillar organisations) are required to adhere to the policy and incorporate Aboriginal cultural activities into their business. These may include but are not limited to: health forums, health seminars and conferences, gatherings where members of the public, representatives of NSW Health and other Government agencies and/or the media are present, or the launch of NSW Health policies and programs.

Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country remain mandatory requirements while the policy allows for flexibility in local implementation of other activities. At all times appropriate consultations and negotiations are to be undertaken as outlined in the policy.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Chief Executives of NSW Health local health districts, specialty networks and pillar organisations are responsible for the implementation of Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy within their services and facilities. All staff should be aware of this Policy and actively participate in its implementation.

The Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy requires NSW Health services, services funded by NSW Health, and its partners, to appropriately observe the Aboriginal cultural activities. These activities include Welcome to Country, Acknowledgement of Country, smoking ceremonies and the display of the Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander flags for the recognition of Aboriginal peoples at NSW Health events and events hosted or sponsored by NSW Health.

REVISION HISTORY

Version	Approved by	Amendment notes
June-2019 (PD2019_025)	Chief Health Officer and	Updates the previous policy to incorporate additional Aboriginal cultural activities.

	Deputy Secretary	
February-2005 (PD2005_472)	Centre for Aboriginal Health	Introduced and established protocols for the recognition of the history, culture and experience of Aboriginal peoples through the inclusion of ceremonies into and displaying flags at NSW Health events and events hosted or sponsored by NSW Health.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy

NSW Health

Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy



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The artwork on the cover is called 'Baalee'. It is inspired by the original artwork of Aboriginal artist Tanya Taylor and designed by the National Aboriginal Design Agency. This artwork symbolises the Centre for Aboriginal Health working in partnership with Aboriginal people to support wholistic health and wellbeing and its role in the health system to build culturally safe and responsive health services.

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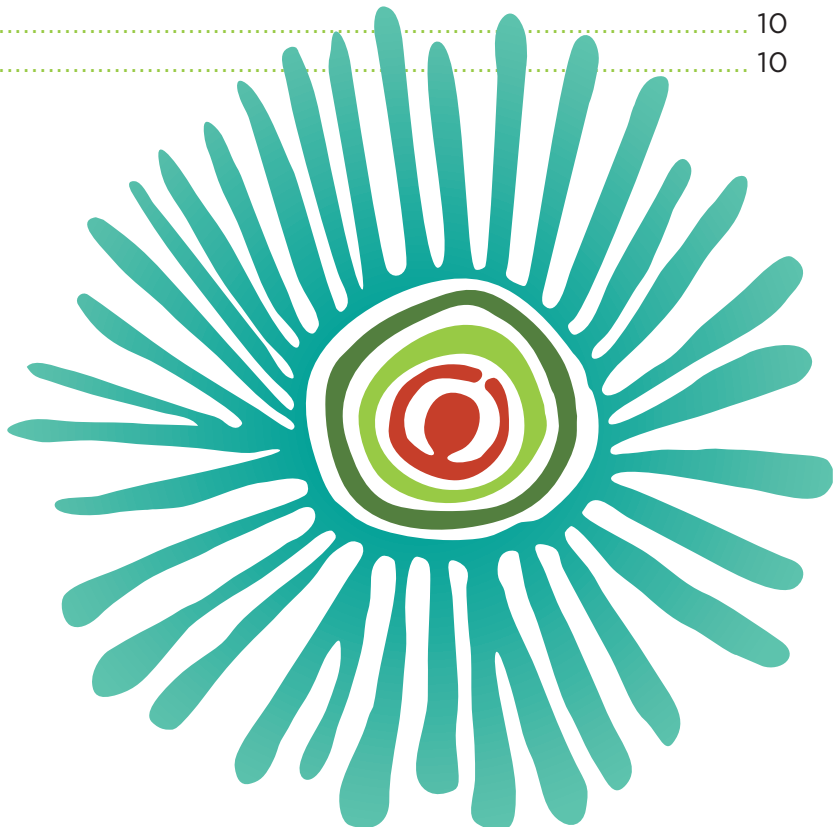
June 2019

Acknowledgement of Country

The NSW Ministry of Health acknowledges the people of the many traditional countries and language groups of New South Wales. It acknowledges the wisdom of Elders past and present, and pays respect to all Aboriginal communities of today.

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1 Introduction

Aboriginal people are the first peoples of Australia and have strong cultures and communities. NSW Health is committed to closing the gap in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

This commitment means ensuring recognition and respect for Aboriginal people and the importance of working in partnership is reflected in policy and embedded in practice. A culturally responsive and respectful health system is essential to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal people and every employee in the NSW Health system has a valuable role to play.

The goal of the *NSW Aboriginal Health Plan 2013-23*, developed in partnership with the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW, is to work in partnership with Aboriginal people to achieve the highest level of health possible for individuals, families and communities. The Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy forms part of a broader set of strategies to achieve this goal through understanding, respecting and representing Aboriginal world-views.

2 Purpose

Health equity for Aboriginal people is reliant on a health system that is safe, accessible and responsive.¹ Embedding cultural respect into the governance, management and delivery of health services underpins the cultural and clinical safety of the health system for Aboriginal people. Supporting and engaging in Aboriginal cultural activities enables NSW Health staff to ensure Aboriginal cultural values, strengths and differences are recognised, respected and celebrated. It is the responsibility of all NSW Health staff to adhere to this policy and incorporate Aboriginal cultural activities into their business wherever and whenever opportunities are available.

This Aboriginal Cultural Activities Policy provides information and guidance to support NSW Health staff in understanding, organising and engaging in Aboriginal cultural activities. This policy provides a summary of a range of cultural activities, and includes case studies and examples to demonstrate appropriate and meaningful engagement with cultural activities at NSW Health events.

3 Why cultural activities are important

Aboriginal people keep their cultural heritage alive by passing their knowledge, arts, rituals and performances from one generation to another, speaking and teaching Aboriginal languages and protecting cultural materials and sacred and significant sites.

Aboriginal cultural activities demonstrate that Aboriginal cultures are living, through maintenance and practice of ceremonies and other activities in accordance with protocols. Engaging in Aboriginal cultural activities provides a practical means of recognising and respecting the unique position of Aboriginal peoples as the traditional owners of the land with a rich and unique heritage of customs and beliefs.

Engaging in Aboriginal cultural activities enables NSW Health staff to communicate Aboriginal cultural practices to the broader community and promote respect and understanding. Recognition of Aboriginal people and culture can assist in building relationships and partnerships that underpin effective implementation of the *NSW Aboriginal Health Plan 2013-23*.

¹ Cultural Respect Framework 2016-26 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. Australian Health Minister's Advisory Council National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Standing Committee

4 Recognising Aboriginal connection to Country

Aboriginal cultures and their language groups are many and varied; there is no truly homogeneous Aboriginal culture. Every community, while sharing some common beliefs and practices, is unique.² Aboriginal culture is rich in custom and beliefs transferred through generations during ceremonies and other practices which relate to Aboriginal peoples connection to Country.

Land is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. The land is not just soil or rocks, but a whole environment that sustains and is sustained by people and culture. For Aboriginal people, the land is the core of all spirituality and this relationship and the spirit of 'country' is central to the issues that are important to Aboriginal people today.

Historically, Aboriginal people were semi-nomadic, with each clan having its own territory from which they 'made their living'. These territories or 'traditional lands' were defined by geographic boundaries such as rivers, lakes and mountains. Aboriginal people understood and cared for their different environments, and adapted to them.³ The connection to Country is enduring and transcends simple ownership. Aboriginal people remain connected to their Country and consider themselves its custodians and caretakers of that country, regardless of where they live.

The term 'Traditional Owner of land' refers to Aboriginal people who are directly descended from the original Aboriginal inhabitants of the cultural area in which the land is situated, and have a cultural association with the land that derives from the traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original Aboriginal inhabitants of the land.⁴ Despite this accepted usage, the term 'owner' reflects Western views of property so, in the above context, some prefer the term 'custodian', which reflects a different association with the land.⁵

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council website provides information on the network of 120 Local Aboriginal Land Councils and the map below identifies the boundaries of the Aboriginal Nations.

5 Guidelines for Aboriginal cultural activities

The following section provides information on cultural activities and the protocols to be observed in relation to each including examples of when these activities may be appropriately used.

5.1 Welcome to Country

The practice of welcoming visitors to Country is a long standing tradition.⁶ It involves mutual obligations: of the hosts bestowing safe passage and hospitality on the visitor, and of the visitors respecting the generosity and customs of the hosts.⁷ It is a way of showing respect for Aboriginal culture and understanding the relationship and continuous connection to Country and its importance to identity, health and wellbeing.

A Welcome to Country is only undertaken by Elders or members of their family who are recognised as Traditional Owners of the land or a locally recognised Aboriginal community spokesperson who may be engaged through the [Local Aboriginal Land Council](#).⁸

2 An introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health cultural protocols and perspectives. 2012. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners <http://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/AHU/2012culturalprotocols.pdf>

3 [Australian Indigenous cultural heritage](#), Australian Government.

4 [Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 \(NSW\)](#), NSW Government.

5 [An introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health cultural protocols and perspectives](#). The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners 2012.

6 Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country, Queensland Studies Authority (2008).

7 Reconciliation Australia: Q&A Factsheet: Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country, 24 March 2010.

8 NSWALC represents 120 Local Aboriginal Land Councils which collectively manage the range of support services delivered at a local level to communities. These services include housing, legal affairs, employment, training and property acquisition and management. Each LALC elects its own Board.

Welcome to Country ceremonies may differ from place to place and community to community, and may consist of a single speech by the representative of the local Aboriginal community, and may be accompanied by other cultural activities.

A Welcome to Country should always occur at the beginning of the event. There is no specific wording for a Welcome to Country ceremony. Generally the person performing the ceremony, the cultural service provider,⁹ offers participants local Aboriginal history and cultural information. The content of the Welcome to Country may be negotiated between the event organiser and the cultural service provider with reference to the nature of the event and community practices. Where possible the event organisers may provide additional information relating to the event including the purpose, relevant background and participants including the names of those who require acknowledgement.

If a Welcome to Country ceremony cannot be undertaken then an Acknowledgement of Country is to be conducted.

Example:

The Ministry of Health organised an event to mark the annual National Sorry Day on 26 May. An Aboriginal Elder was engaged through the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council to perform the Welcome to Country. The event organiser provided background information, including the order of proceedings and other presentations. Information on NSW Health services that respond to the needs of Stolen Generations survivors was also provided so that reference may be included in the Welcome to Country if agreed. Information on guests of honour at the event requiring recognition and acknowledgement were also provided to tailor the Welcome to Country to the audience.

5.2 Acknowledgement of Country

Acknowledgement of Country is a way for non-Aboriginal people, or an Aboriginal person who is not a Traditional Owner of the land where the event is being held, to show recognition and respect for Aboriginal people.

A Chairperson, Master of Ceremonies or Speaker can begin by acknowledging that the event is taking place in the Country of the Traditional Owners. Subsequent speakers may also acknowledge Country. If a Welcome to Country is performed at the event, this should precede the Acknowledgement of Country.

If the Traditional Owners of the land are known it is preferable to include this in the Acknowledgement. If the Traditional Owners are not known an Acknowledgment of Country can begin by acknowledging 'the Traditional Owners of this land' or 'the Traditional Owners of the land we are meeting on', without specifically identifying them by name.

It is important that any Elders, or members of the family of Traditional Owners, who are in attendance are also acknowledged.

Example:

"I would like to acknowledge the _____ people, who are the Traditional Owners of this Land. I would also like to pay my respect to the Elders both past and present. I would like to extend that respect to other Aboriginal people and colleagues present today".

Alternate first sentence where Traditional Owners are not known:

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this Land.

⁹ Cultural service provider refers to the person engaged to undertake a cultural activity

5.3 Smoking Ceremony

A Smoking Ceremony is one of the most significant ancient ceremonies performed by Aboriginal people. The ceremony involves the smoldering of various native plants to produce smoke which is believed to have cleansing properties and the ability to ward off bad spirits.

Smoking ceremonies are only to be conducted by Aboriginal people with specialised cultural knowledge. Given the significant nature of the ceremony, Smoking Ceremonies are usually only performed at major events. NSW Health staff are encouraged to consult with Local Aboriginal Land Council to determine if a Smoking Ceremony is appropriate for a planned event.

Example:

A metropolitan Hospital located in an area with a large Aboriginal population has a Palliative Care Unit which sees many patients who cannot be relocated back to Country. Many of these patients subsequently pass away at the hospital.

Following renovations to the Unit, Hospital staff consulted with local Aboriginal Elders, introduced by the Local Aboriginal Land Council, on how to start afresh in the unit. A Smoking Ceremony was recommended and two Local Elders visited the Unit for the first ever Smoking Ceremony at the hospital to cleanse and rid the Palliative Care Unit of spirits.

The ceremony signified a new beginning and provided an opportunity to initiate ongoing engagement with Aboriginal people in the local area. Palliative care staff said it was uplifting and significant to be part of the process.

5.4 Traditional dance

Dance is a unique aspect of ceremonies which is learned and passed down from one generation to another. To dance is to be knowledgeable about the stories of the ancestral heroes although dancing, unlike painting and singing, is learnt at an early age.

Event organisers may consider including traditional Aboriginal dance at events where cultural entertainment is appropriate. This may include awards ceremonies, opening of significant functions or the launch of State-wide strategies. There are many professional Aboriginal dance troupes and individual performers in NSW. NSW Health staff are encouraged to consult with these troupes and individuals to negotiate remuneration as charges may vary according to level of training, the size of the company, the nature of the dance required and the terms of engagement.

5.5 Didgeridoo and Clap Sticks

The Didgeridoo is a cylindrical wind instrument usually about 1.2 metres in length developed by Aboriginal people of Northern Australia. All didgeridoo players are male. They are frequently part of Welcome to Country ceremonies to 'call' speakers, special guests and the audience to begin the event. They may also play in other parts of an event. Didgeridoo players also contribute to other celebrations and functions as soloists or as part of the mix of cultural activities. Clap Sticks are the traditional percussion instrument of all Aboriginal people, providing rhythmic accompaniment for song and dance. They consist of two sticks crafted from various woods and are often intricately decorated. Most commonly used during Corroborees and social dancing, clap sticks are played by striking one against the other to provide particular rhythms. It is often the only instrument used to accompany singing and is played by both men and women.

Example:

The annual NSW Health Awards are announced at a gala dinner. In addition to the Welcome to Country at the commencement of the event the Acknowledgement of Country is performed by the Master of Ceremonies at the commencement of the Awards dinner to welcome guests. The event commences with a solo didgeridoo player to signal it is time for guests to be seated, and midway through the awards ceremony a traditional Aboriginal dance is performed. The dance troupe lead explains the story and cultural significance of each dance which engages the audience and promotes respect and understanding of Aboriginal culture.

6 Creating a welcoming and safe environment

Health service organisations are encouraged to create welcoming and safe environments for Aboriginal people. The design of the service and layout of the facilities from both a functional and cultural perspective should be considered. This approach is supported by the Australian Commission on Quality and Safety in Health Care resources¹⁰ which include effective, evidence-based strategies to support health organisations to improve care for Aboriginal people through the implementation of the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards.

Options for inclusion in the Health service environment include:

6.1 Aboriginal art

Art provides an expression of Aboriginal identity, history, and relationship to land, and is a means by which customary laws and practices are learnt, reinforced and respected.

Aboriginal art provides a means of demonstrating ongoing recognition and respect for Aboriginal people and culture to the broader community for which the art may be visible. When commissioning or sourcing Aboriginal art, NSW Health staff should consult with the local Aboriginal community representatives to engage services of an artist or to ensure that the chosen artwork is appropriate for the community.

Acknowledgment should be given to artists, including a description of the symbolic meaning behind the artwork, at the site where art is displayed unless otherwise agreed with the artist. Agreement may be reached where artwork has been commissioned and licensed from the artist for an agreed time and for agreed purposes. The Centre for Aboriginal Health is available to provide advice on the commissioning, sourcing and use of Aboriginal art.

Example:

The Centre for Aboriginal Health engaged an Aboriginal organisation to produce an image for use in a range of Aboriginal communication resources on an ongoing basis. The following artist acknowledgement is included each time the artwork is used:



The artwork is called 'Baalee'. It is inspired by the original artwork of Aboriginal artist Tanya Taylor and designed by the National Aboriginal Design Agency. This artwork symbolises the Centre for Aboriginal Health working in partnership with Aboriginal people to support wholistic health and wellbeing and its role in the health system to build a culturally safe and responsive health service.

6.2 Signs, symbols and displays

Posters, plaques, signs and other displays that NSW Health services develop should consider the use of Statements of Reconciliation (such as Statements of Commitment) and Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners. Statements of Commitment have an important role to play in ensuring Aboriginal people and their cultural considerations are recognised in the strategic directions of Health organisations. These statements may be developed locally with senior executive Health staff as signatories. Statements of Commitment may include meaningful artwork which reflects the role of the organisation, and should be displayed in areas where able to be seen by employees, clients and other visitors to the Health service.

¹⁰ [Improving care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People](#), Australian Commission on Quality and Safety in Health Care

6.3 Family considerations

It is important to acknowledge and manage the complex kinship relationships that exist in the local community and the importance of the extended family. Providing access to facilities and outside spaces for family gatherings and consultations should be considered by Health services.

Example:

A large teaching hospital in the inner city has many Aboriginal patients referred from regional areas of NSW. To support the social and emotional well-being of patients and to cater for visiting family the hospital commissioned the creation of a garden area within the hospital grounds. In consultation with Aboriginal community members an unused courtyard was transformed into a place for reflection and healing for patients and hospital staff.

The design incorporated intimate spaces with open and informal ones for larger social gatherings. The plant design included edible and ornamental species used in ceremonies and medicine. At the entrance to the garden, a copy of the Local Health Districts Statement of Reconciliation was displayed and included in the garden was a plaque to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Land.

7 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags

7.1 History of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags

The Aboriginal flag was designed by Aboriginal Elder Harold Thomas in 1971 to symbolise Aboriginal identity. The top half of the flag is black to represent the Aboriginal people. The red in the lower half represents the red earth (the relationship to the land) and the red ochre used in Aboriginal ceremonies. The circle of yellow represents the sun (giver of life) and yellow ochre. The Aboriginal flag became an official 'Flag of Australia' in 1995 under the Flags Act 1953.

The Torres Strait Islander flag also became an official flag of Australia in July 1995. The flag was designed by Torres Strait Islander Mr Bernard Namok and is emblazoned with a white Dhari (headdress). The white five pointed star beneath it symbolises peace, the five major island groups and the navigational importance of stars to the seafaring people of the Torres Strait. The green stripes represent the land, the black stripes represent the people, and the blue represents the sea.

7.2 Displaying Flags

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags are a highly visible means of demonstrating NSW Health's recognition of Aboriginal peoples as the first peoples of Australia. Displaying the flags promotes a sense of community partnership and also demonstrates NSW Health's commitment to closing the gap.

Flags may be displayed permanently as part of the external health facility environment or within a building. Flags may also be displayed on a temporary basis where events are being held. Flags should always be flown and displayed in a respectful and dignified manner.

It is important to be aware of the order of display; from an audience perspective from left to right, the Australian flag, the NSW flag, the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag.

In the case where only one of either an Australian or NSW State flag is available to display with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag, either of these should be displayed first (see image below). However, if the Australian or NSW State flag can be positioned at a higher level, it can be positioned in the center between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags.

The Centre for Aboriginal Health has the full set of flags and stand available for use at events within the Ministry of Health. It is recommended that all NSW Health organisations have a full set of flags available for use at events.

8 Organising Aboriginal Cultural Activities

8.1 Planning for events

Aboriginal ceremonies, as appropriate, should be included in all NSW Health events including:

- Meetings, forums, seminars and conferences
- Launches of policies and programs
- Ceremonies engaging the attention of participants, observers and the broader community (e.g. Awards ceremonies)
- Opening of new buildings or extensions
- Events for significant Aboriginal days (e.g. NAIDOC week)
- Gatherings where members of the public, representatives of NSW Health and other Government agencies and/or the media are present

To determine the type of ceremony best suited to an event, consultation should be undertaken with Aboriginal representatives. The decision on who to consult will be dependent on the type of event, the location and who is coordinating the event. It is important to note the diversity of Aboriginal cultures in NSW and that protocols for Aboriginal activities vary in different locations.

It is recommended that NSW Health Staff organising an event first contact either the Centre for Aboriginal Health or the Director or Manager of Aboriginal Health in their Local Health District to obtain advice and support in organising an Aboriginal cultural activity. Advice may be sought to confirm the Traditional Owners, to determine the type of activity that is most appropriate to the event as well as to engage an activity provider. Advice may also be sought from the local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and Local Aboriginal Land Councils.



8.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander significant dates

There are a number of dates significant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that are celebrated with all Australians today. Some key dates the nation embraces every year include NAIDOC week, National Sorry Day and National Reconciliation Week.

26 January	Australia Day/Survival Day	For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Australia Day is also an opportunity to recognise the survival of our people and our culture.
13 February	National Apology Anniversary	Anniversary of the formal apology made on 13 February 2008 by the government and the Parliament of Australia to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - in particular to the Stolen Generations.
Third Thursday in March	National Close the Gap Day	National Close the Gap Day is an annual event held to raise awareness of the Indigenous health crisis.
May	National Sorry Day	National Sorry Day offers the community the opportunity to acknowledge the impact of the policies spanning more than 150 years of forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.
Last week of May to first week in June	National Reconciliation Week	National Reconciliation Week is an opportunity for all Australians to learn about the shared histories, cultures and achievements of Aboriginal people.
3 June	Mabo Day	The Mabo case, led by Eddie Koiki Mabo, argued that Terra Nullius should not have been applied to Australia as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a unique connection with the land.
First full week in July	National NAIDOC Week	NAIDOC week is held from the first Sunday to the Second Sunday in July and celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
4 August	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day, celebrates the strengths and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
9 August	International Day of the World's Indigenous People	The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is observed each year to promote and protect the rights of the world's indigenous population.

8.3 Cultural and intellectual property

Cultural and intellectual property rights include the right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to:

- own and control their cultural and intellectual property
- ensure that any means of protecting their cultural and intellectual property is based on the principle of self-determination
- be recognised as the primary guardians and interpreters of their cultures and so regulate how stories and information are presented
- authorise or refuse the use of their cultural and intellectual property according to customary law
- maintain the secrecy of their knowledge and other cultural practices
- be given full and proper attribution for sharing their heritage
- control the recording of cultural customs and expressions, the particular language which may be intrinsic to cultural identity
- knowledge, skill and teaching of culture.¹¹

¹¹ Our Culture: Our Future, Terri Janke, n.1, pp. 47-48

8.4 Fees for service

Cultural activities are the intellectual property of Aboriginal people and as such, providers of these services are entitled to appropriate remuneration. It may be incorrectly assumed that Aboriginal people may participate in cultural activities without payment. However, it is appropriate that they be paid for their time, expertise and knowledge, just as it is for any other artist or professional.

Fees will vary and should be negotiated and agreed between the cultural activity provider and the event organiser in advance of the service being provided. This negotiation should consider:

- The type of service required from the cultural service provider
- The nature, formality and status of the event
- Travel to and from the event, particularly in rural and remote areas where transport may be an issue
- Providing transport to and from an event for Elders and other participants in the ceremony or activity as well as the service provider
- The time and effort involved from the perspective of the cultural activity provider
- Timing of the event and particularly when the event is scheduled for evenings and weekends
- Annual increases in pre-determined fees.

The Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council has a fee schedule for Welcome to Country available at <http://metrolalc.org.au/services-resources/welcome-to-country/>. Local Aboriginal Lands Councils may be contacted to provide this information for other regions.

8.5 Payment methods

When a provider of a cultural activity is engaged by a NSW Health organisation a quotation for the fee should be requested. When provided this should be accepted in writing by the NSW Health organisation. Payment should then be made in accordance with the NSW Health organisation's standard financial procedures without delay.







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