

Best Practice Guidelines for collecting Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander status

The under identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients in health services has been well documented. Evidence shows the most accurate way of identifying Indigenous status is via self-report from standardised Indigenous status questions.

As a result, the Australian Government has established best practice guidelines for collecting and recording accurate information on the Indigenous status of patients. In information outlined below has been sourced from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare National Best Practice Guidelines for collecting Indigenous Status in Health Data Sets (2010). The information provides standardised questions for identifying Indigenous status, recommendations for supporting the implementation of the guidelines and data quality assurance.

The standard Indigenous status question

The following question should be asked of all clients to establish their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous status:

'Are you [is the person] of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?'

The standard response options

Three standard response options should be provided to patients to answer the question (either verbally or on a written form):

- No
- Yes, Aboriginal
- Yes, Torres Strait Islander

For patients of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, both 'Yes' boxes should be marked.

Alternatively, a fourth response category may also be included if this better suits the data collection practices of the agency or establishment concerned:

- Yes, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

If the question has not been completed on a returned form, this should be followed up and confirmed with the client.



How to ask the question

Staff responsible for registering a patient should ask the Indigenous status question when the patient is first registered with the service. The question should be asked of *all* patients irrespective of appearance, country of birth or whether the staff knows of the patient or their family background.

The question should be placed within the context of other questions related to cultural background, such as country of birth and main language spoken. If a form is used, a preamble may be included to introduce questions related to cultural background and identity, however this is not a requirement. Should service providers feel a preamble is necessary, the following statement is suggested:

'The following information will assist in the planning and provision of appropriate and improved health care and services.'

Patients may be asked the question directly, or asked to complete a form with the question included, and the patient should answer this question themselves. There are some situations, such as in the case of birth and death registrations, when the patient will be unable to answer the question. In these instances it is acceptable for certain others—such as a close friend, relative or member of the household—to be asked the question and to answer the question on the client's behalf if they feel confident to provide accurate information. In instances when a patient may be temporarily unable to answer the question, it is also acceptable for certain others who know the patient well to respond on their behalf; however, this response should be verified with the patient wherever possible.

Recording responses

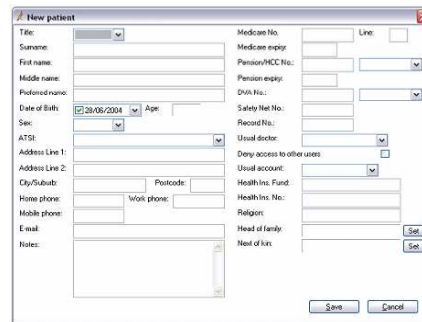
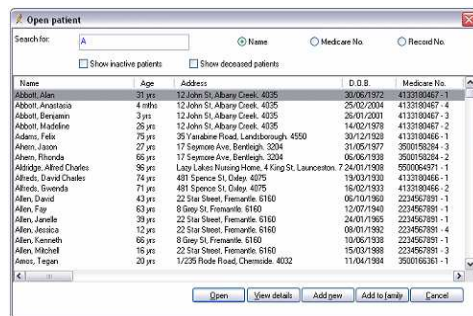
How to record responses

The Practice information system should record Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous status . Instructions for recording status in Medical Director and Best Practice clinical software are outlined below. In addition, the standard categories for practices that do not use clinical software have been outlined;

Best Practice For a new patient

In the home screen;

- Click on the 'Add new' button from the open patient screen
- The new patient prompt screen will appear (shown below);
- A patient's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status can be recorded in the left column of this prompt screen.
- When the information has been recorded, click 'Save'



For existing patients

In the patient file;

- Click 'Open'
- Select 'Demographics' (F10) - The patient demographics prompt screen will appear
- A patient's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status can be recorded in the left column of this prompt screen.
- When the information has been recorded, click 'Save'



Medical Director

For a new patient

Medical Director 2

- CLICK Patients
- In the pop-up box **SELECT** New
- **TICK** the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander box (whichever applies)

Medical Director 3

- CLICK Open
- In the pop-up box **SELECT** New
- **TICK** the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander box (whichever applies)

For existing patients

Medical Director 2

- Click on **EDIT**
- **SELECT** Patient Details
- **TICK** the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander box (whichever applies)

Medical Director 3

- Double **CLICK** on the ATSI option in the top right hand section of the screen
- The Patient Details pop-up box with appear
- **TICK** the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander box (whichever applies)

Practices without clinical software

For practices that are not computerized or choose not record this information in clinical software, it is recommended you record one of the following categories for every patient;

1. Aboriginal but not Torres Strait Islander origin
2. Torres Strait Islander but not Aboriginal origin
3. Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin
4. Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander origin
5. Not stated / inadequately described

Putting the guidelines into practice

If the patient is a child under 15

Where the patient is a child under 15 years of age, the parent or guardian is asked to declare the patient's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status on their behalf.

If the parent or guardian is not available, a close relative, friend or another member of the household accompanying the child should be asked to provide this information.

If the accompanying adult is unable to provide this information, the child's parent/guardian should be contacted as follow-up to establish the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status of the child.

If the patient is too ill to be questioned or is unable to respond to questions

Where the client is unable to respond to standard questions because they are too ill, unconscious or incapable due to a psychiatric condition or dementia, in the first instance the staff member should ask the patient's carer, relative or any other person accompanying the patient who knows the patient well and is confident of providing accurate information. The response provided by this person should always be verified with the patient when they have recovered sufficiently to be able to answer the question themselves.

If the patient does not speak English, or cannot read or write

If a patient does not speak English, but is accompanied by someone who can interpret for them, it is recommended that the person accompanying them is asked to translate the question and their response. If there is no one with the patient who can speak English, it is recommended that an interpreter or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander liaison officer (who can interpret the relevant Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language spoken by the client) be called to assist.

If a form is to be completed and the patient cannot read or write, it is recommended that an appropriate staff member (e.g. an interpreter, social worker, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander liaison officer/health worker) go through the questions with the patient.

All patients should be given the opportunity to respond to the Indigenous status question for themselves. While a patient who speaks an Aboriginal language may be highly likely to be an Aboriginal person, their status cannot be assumed; the patient may be of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin, for example.

Non-English speaking clients from various cultural backgrounds should also be asked the question and given the opportunity to self-report in response to the Indigenous status question. Inclusion of the Indigenous status question in *all* data

collections, with *all* patients, normalises the question and reinforces its consistent use as standard practice.

If staff are reluctant to ask the question

Staff should be encouraged to collect information from *all* patients in a professional and respectful manner, without anticipating or making assumptions about the patient's identity or about how the client is likely to react or respond to any given question. Staff should be encouraged to regard the Indigenous status question as no more or less sensitive or problematic than other items of personal data routinely collected from patients.

All patients, whether Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous, have the right to self-report their Indigenous status, rather than have their status assumed and recorded on their behalf. To refrain from asking any client the Indigenous status question is an act of discrimination which infringes upon the patient's right to respond to this question for themselves.

Given that *the question should be asked correctly, consistently and uniformly of all patients, staff should not attempt to modify the standard question in any way*. The Indigenous status question in the Census, ABS household surveys and other major data collections is worded *precisely* as it is in these guidelines. Changing the question's wording, even slightly, has the potential to alter the question's meaning, and this may in turn influence the client's response.

If a patient wants to know why they are being asked this question

Following are several responses that may assist staff in explaining to patients the reasons for asking the Indigenous status question.

- The Indigenous status question is one of several questions related to a patient's origin and demographic characteristics that are asked of all patients who attend a health service, enrol with Medicare or are involved in the registration of a birth or death.
- The collection of Indigenous status is necessary for the government and other services to plan and deliver appropriate health services for all Australians, to assess the impact of services on particular groups in the community and to improve health care and to monitor changes in health and wellbeing over time.
- The response to this question allows service providers to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients have an opportunity to access relevant services—such as Aboriginal liaison officers and Aboriginal health workers, health checks, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific immunisation considerations and PBS listings—if they choose.
- Service providers cannot make assumptions about the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous status of any patient, therefore Indigenous status can only be determined by asking each client this question.

- All personal information is protected by a strict Privacy Act—the use of personal information for reasons other than the purpose for which it was collected is strictly prohibited, unless the client’s consent is given.
- Should a patient request a more detailed explanation of where the data go or the ways they are used, staff may wish to refer the client to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare website www.aihw.gov.au or the Australian Bureau of Statistics website www.abs.gov.au .

If a patient objects to the question or declines to answer

Where a patient objects to the question or declines to answer, they should be informed of their right to decline to answer the Indigenous status question and be advised that their level of care and access to services will not be affected if they choose not to answer the question.

While staff has a duty to collect and record Indigenous status information from all patients as correctly as possible, they are not obliged to convince a disgruntled, upset or unwilling patient to respond to the question. Furthermore, while staff has a duty, if queried, to explain to clients why this question is being asked, they are not obliged to justify the use of standard question.

If the patient chooses not to answer the question ‘correctly’

There may be occasions where a patient of a service is known to staff as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, yet chooses not to report as such in response to the Indigenous status question. Conversely, there may be occasions where a known non-Indigenous patient chooses to report themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in response to this question.

Patients have a right to self-report their Indigenous status and staff should therefore always record the response that the patient provides; they should not question or comment on the patient’s response. The patient’s recorded response should not be altered or annotated in any way to reflect the views of the staff member collecting the information.

Any patient who self-reports as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander should be offered the services of Aboriginal liaison officers or Aboriginal health workers where available; however, the patient’s choice to engage or not engage with such services should be respected.

If a patient wishes to change their previously recorded Indigenous status

All patients should have an opportunity to confirm or update any previously recorded personal information on a regular basis, including confirmation or alteration of their recorded Indigenous status.



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The most convenient approach, particularly in general practice settings, may be to routinely provide clients with a copy of their personal details for verification, allowing an opportunity for patients to correct or update their Indigenous status.

Any changes should be received without comment and patients should not be required to provide a reason for changing their recorded Indigenous status.

Providing a welcoming and culturally safe environment

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians often have different concepts of health and illness from those of the general population. Recognising that there are cultural differences is important in providing good quality care for the Indigenous community.

Providing an environment that is welcoming of the Aboriginal community will aid in making these patients feel safe and secure. As a result, they will be more likely to identify their cultural status and disclose health concerns, which in turn will increase access to health services.

There are some simple ways of communicating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that they are welcomed and within a safe environment.

- Display Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander symbols of welcome, posters or locally developed artwork
- Reception staff acknowledge arrival and presence of all patients
- Provide a child friendly environment e.g. toys and books
- Provide relevant reading material for Aboriginal patients e.g. Koori mail newspaper, local newsletters & children's books with Aboriginal characters or content

Resources to assist

- **Kuranula Aboriginal Corporation**

Artwork from the Gnarra women's group can be purchased or pieces can be commissioned on request Ph: 9528 0287

- **Gnarra Women's Art Exhibition**

Exhibition of local artists from **1st May to 11th May 2010** at Hazelhurst Art Gallery

- **Aboriginal posters**

- FREE NAIDOC Week posters are available from the NAIDOC Week website <http://www.naidoc.org.au/index.aspx> or by calling 1800 050 009
- A variety of Aboriginal posters can be purchased from the following website <http://www.aboriginalposters.com.au/gallery.index.htm>

- **Cultural Awareness training**

Kuranula Aboriginal Corporation is holding cultural awareness training specific to the Aboriginal community. The training will be held at Jannali Community Hall, Mary St, Jannali on Monday, 24th May from 12pm until 4pm

▪ **Aboriginal Children's books**

There are numerous sources that stories of Aboriginal people can be purchased. Below is a selection that may assist in ordering or sourcing some books;

- www.indijreaders.com.au/
- www.booksillustrated.com.au/bi_indigen.php
- www.dreamtime.auz.net/default.asp?PageID=210

▪ **Aboriginal newspapers and other reading material**

- Subscription for the Australian Government Indigenous Newslines magazine are FREE and can be arranged by visiting <http://www.indigenous.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>
- Subscriptions to the Koori Mail newspaper can be arranged by contacting the Koori Mail on Ph: 02 6622 2666 or via the website <http://www.koorimail.com/> annual subscription is approximately \$75.00
- Subscriptions to the National Indigenous Times newspaper can be arranged by contacting the newspaper via the website <http://www.nit.com.au/shop>