

Submission of Thomas Beckhurst to the Yoorrook Justice Commission

Who I am

1. I am a proud Yorta Yorta man speaking out for my brothers and sisters in the correctional system. I was a spokesman for Kooris in custody during the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. I am making this submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission to show how Aboriginal prisoners are discriminated against and how we receive worse medical treatment than other prisoners.
2. I am fifty-one years old, and I have been in institutions for forty-four years of my life.

My treatment in custody

3. I was remanded on the 29th of April, 2022, and taken to the Metropolitan Remand Centre (MRC). I was placed in isolation for two weeks. Whilst I was in isolation, I began to experience bleeding from my rectum.
4. I was moved to Marngoneet on the 10th of May. I was in general population for a week and then I was placed in segregation. On the 27th of June I was moved back to MRC, and from there I was bailed.
5. On the 27th of October I received a twelve-month sentence, not including time served. I was taken to Melbourne Assessment Prison, and then on the 31st of October I was taken to Port Phillip Prison. On the 2nd of December I was taken to Middleton, and then I was transferred to Loddon on the 8th of December. On the 13th of January I was taken to Port Phillip Prison, where I am currently being held under sentence.
6. Throughout the period of my incarceration, the bleeding has worsened. I have brought this issue up many times with the medical staff, and they have told me repeatedly that there is nothing wrong, even when I put my shit on the window to show them it was bloody. One doctor told me that I should be taken straight to hospital, but this has not happened. My brother died of bowel cancer and I am worried that I might have it too. I have no idea what is happening inside my body.
7. I showed the blood in the toilet bowl to a young Koori and he said, "You're dying." I was meant to see the doctor in February and he didn't even turn up; apparently he didn't come in that day.
8. I spoke with another doctor who told me that I should be taken straight to hospital, but this still has not happened. I am still waiting on a colonoscopy to be conducted. It's getting beyond a joke. I am shitting blood and mucus every 3 – 4 hours.

9. I have complained to the Health Complaints Commissioner and the Ombudsman about the way I have been treated, but nothing has happened. They have moved me from prison to prison because I keep complaining, and I have to start the process over each time.
10. The medical treatment in prison is a joke. They put people with ice addictions on methadone treatment – getting them addicted to a more dangerous substance. It's impossible to see a doctor or a nurse.
11. I see other Aboriginal people having the same problems. There are Aboriginal Liaison Officers, but they are female and we can't talk to them about men's business. It is a traditional thing – I feel embarrassed talking with an Aboriginal woman about my medical problem. At the same time, I do not want to disrespect these women by telling them I do not want to discuss this issue with them.
12. The prisons discriminate against Aboriginal people in the medical treatment they provide. All Aboriginal prisoners are treated the same way, we ask for things and are refused constantly, but other people get the treatment they need. There are other blokes in my unit who want to be taken to see a surgeon and they're not taken. That's why there are a lot of deaths in custody – because we are not treated fairly. We don't ask for anything because we get shut down.

Denial of human rights and rehabilitation in the prison system

13. We are not able to practise our culture in the system. They are trying to take it away from us as much as they can. We have to pay for our own paint and paintbrushes to do artwork. We are not able to tell our Dreamtime stories through art.
14. They tell us there is all this funding out there for us, that there are homes for us, but where? They say they are helping Aboriginal people to rehabilitate, but why do I keep failing? I have been in men's prisons in NSW and Victoria for 33 years. They say the system can rehabilitate you – it can't. You have to wait to get on the methadone program, or on the drug and alcohol treatment programs.
15. Aboriginal prisoners need to be able to participate in Aboriginal programs, and we need Aboriginal welfare workers. How are we supposed to speak about the problems we suffer from in front of non-Aboriginal people? We are too shy – we are shy people. As Aboriginal people we can understand each other, understand the alcohol abuse and the sexual abuse, but we can't talk about these things in front of whitefellas. How can you speak out when you're the only black man in the group and the whitefellas are looking down on you?
16. People come into prison vulnerable, they don't know what to do. You take a Koori off the street and put him in a 6 x 4 cell – he's used to the bush. They put him in a cell full of whitefellas – how can he speak to them about problems which whitefellas created?

17. There is no effective rehabilitation in prison. There is no commitment. When they say in court that you can get your life together in prison – that's a load of bullshit. Prison leads you down a dark road. People don't understand how hard it is to rebuild your life when you're sent to prison. You're released with a dole cheque, no home, and told to report for parole.
18. We are losing a lot in gaol and we are not gaining anything. The little we are given is not enough to maintain our cultural strength. Wounds will heal, but scars will always remain.