

# Yoorrook Justice Commission

## Submission to Health and Healthcare Inquiry

### Greg Smith

This submission is based on a project conducted jointly with Elder Les Stanley, then Manager Mark Hammersley and the residents of an Aboriginal-Controlled AOD recovery service in Victoria. Mark, Les and myself are not associated with the service at the current time. This submission does not seek to represent the views of the agency involved.

This submission seeks to bring the attention of the Commission to perspectives of the men involved in the project, and their contributions to positive developments in the wider service sector.

Within the project, men residing at the facility in 2018 described:

- impacts of racism and judgemental attitudes on their lives
- how the cultural nature of the service and relationships with staff contributed to major positive developments in their lives
- how these compared with their experiences of support from 'mainstream' agencies.

The project documented ways that 'mainstream' AOD services presented major barriers to Aboriginal men wishing to engage with them. Drawing on the work of Bindi Bennett, the project concludes that in order to reduce these barriers, mainstream services would need to demonstrate that staff:

Values:

- wanted to learn about Aboriginal culture
- were encouraged in acts of care
- explored what is important in the lives of men

Knowledge

- with lived experience in addictions being employed and supported

Skills:

- were trained in respectful relationships and 'deep listening'

Self-awareness

- were supported in a reflective 'journey of the self, including an awareness of their place in colonising society and implications for practice.

Input from the men made a substantial contribution to the development of respectful practises within AOD and community services generally, irrespective of the cultures involved. With the guidance of a working group, the project produced a workbook on respectful practices to assist in training and supporting community services workers, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists.

The thesis, completed in late 2023, argues that relational practices and knowledges implicit in Aboriginal cultures, provide guidance to all practice in contemporary multi-cultural society. It calls for greater transparency in the use of western approaches to AoD practice, based on western concepts of identity, professional expertise and 'treatment'. In the absence of transparency, the thesis argues that AoD services perpetuate the colonisation of Aboriginal peoples, and the marginalising of cultural and individuality of all peoples.

The men challenged the nature of the 'professionalised' worker/ client relationships common to support services. They promote a greater understanding of the role of relationships in AoD practice, incorporated sharing of lived experiences – beyond the confines of experiences relating to addictions.

Explorations of the need for AoD services can perpetuate 'problem' and 'deficit based' approaches to First Nations communities and individuals. As an alternative, engagement with Aboriginal peoples and communities provides the possibilities to inform developments of relational, culturally responsive models all practice across the community service sector.

Les, Mark, Greg and the men involved in the project have presented these issues at a number of AoD conferences in recent years.

Attached is a booklet the includes extracts of accounts of the men on the topics indicated above, and the 'Respectful practice' workbook.

More detail on the project is documented in the thesis:

<https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/items/55d4cf6c-b71c-4ced-8676-9b81581e5d9a>

I hope that this submission is helpful to the considerations of the Commission.

Greg Smith

