

IDAA Position Statement

Racial Discrimination in the Dental Health Sector

June 2024

Position

The Indigenous Dental Association of Australia (IDAA), a not-for-profit organisation that advocates for the Indigenous dental profession, stands firmly against racial discrimination in all its forms. Racial discrimination is a deeply ingrained social issue that continues to harm individuals and contributes to oral health disparities across populations.

As the peak body for Indigenous dental health in Australia, we commit to supporting a dental health sector that upholds equality, justice and human dignity for all. Through education and awareness, policy reforms and active engagement we endeavour to eradicate racial discrimination and create a future where every person is treated with fairness, respect and dignity, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Discussion

Racial discrimination is a violation of basic human rights and a barrier to achieving social justice and equality. It perpetuates systemic inequalities, denies individuals access to opportunities, and undermines the principles of diversity and inclusivity. The IDAA recognises that racial discrimination has historical roots and has been perpetuated through institutional practices, biased policies and prejudiced attitudes.

A significant aspect of our mission is to enhance the representation of Indigenous students in universities. Currently, Indigenous professionals comprise less than 0.5% of the dental workforce, while the Indigenous population represents approximately 3% of the total Australian population.¹ We strive to bridge this gap and create opportunities for Indigenous students to pursue successful careers in dentistry, thereby fostering a more diverse and inclusive workforce and increasing Indigenous contributions as part of the registered dental workforce.²

To improve Indigenous oral health and strengthen the Indigenous dental workforce, it is imperative to increase the representation of Indigenous students in Australia's university dental courses. While universities nationwide have made efforts to allocate places for Indigenous dental students, there are still significant challenges hindering equal access to tertiary education. Racism and discrimination are barriers that affect the recruitment, retention and leadership opportunities of the Indigenous dental workforce.³

The presence of racism and discrimination within Australia's universities, coupled with insufficient understanding and demonstration of cultural capability, requires urgent attention. In 2023 alone, the IDAA received five reports from members regarding incidents of racism occurring within the university sector. These reports involve not only students but also academic staff, including senior members. Progress to lessen racial discrimination has been minimal and it continues to be one of the major challenges in recruiting and retaining Indigenous students in dental education programs.

This, in turn, limits the capacity of the Indigenous dental workforce to provide culturally responsive dental healthcare for Indigenous Australians. Support pathways and programs throughout education and training, which continue into employment, must be a priority to increase the recruitment and retention of the Indigenous workforce.⁴

Our commitments

The IDAA advocates for the dental health sector to actively challenge and address racial discrimination at all levels. This requires a comprehensive approach involving:

- education and awareness
- policy reforms
- active engagement from individuals, communities and institutions.

Education and awareness

Education and awareness are essential tools to challenge racial biases and stereotypes. By promoting understanding, empathy and cultural capability, we can foster educational environments where diversity is celebrated, and discrimination is eliminated. It is crucial to educate individuals about the historical context and consequences of racial discrimination, encouraging dialogue and critical thinking to break down barriers.

Policy reforms

Policy reforms are necessary to address systemic racial discrimination. It is essential to review and revise legislation, regulations and practices that perpetuate racial disparities. This includes equal access to quality education, employment opportunities and the healthcare system. Affirmative action programs can play a role in redressing historical disadvantages and promoting diversity.

Active engagement from individuals, communities and institutions

Individuals and communities must actively engage in challenging their own biases and prejudices. It is crucial to listen to and amplify the voices and experiences of marginalised communities, providing platforms for their narratives and perspectives. By standing in solidarity, we can create an environment that embraces diversity, promotes inclusivity and eliminates racial discrimination.

Conclusion

The IDAA is unwavering in its mission to continue championing the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in all oral health matters. The development of an Indigenous dental workforce is essential to advocate for and provide culturally safe oral health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that is free from racial discrimination.

References

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Resources

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