

Recording Indigenous Status

*“Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?”
“Is your baby of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?”*

Why do we need to ask about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin?

- Aboriginal people have poorer health status than other Victorians
- The life expectancy of Aboriginal people is significantly less than other Victorians
- Aboriginal babies are more likely to have a low birth weight and die in the perinatal period
- Aboriginal people are admitted to hospital in their forties for diseases and conditions generally associated with the elderly.

Commonwealth, state and territory governments and Aboriginal health organisations need to know all they can about the health status of the Aboriginal population. The information you collect will inform policy development to ensure services are customised to address areas of most need.

What does “Indigenous” mean?

“Indigenous” refers to Indigenous Australians, that is, persons descended from the original inhabitants of Australia, including Tasmania and the Torres Strait Islands. Torres Strait is between Cape York and New Guinea. It does not include islands in the South Pacific or Indian Oceans.

Indigenous includes both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In Victoria, the original inhabitants are Aboriginal but health data will capture people from other parts of Australia and the Torres Strait.

“Indigenous” is a term used in data collections in a number of countries and refers to Indigenous people of that country. A Maori person from New Zealand may reply “Yes” to the question of Indigenous Status, assuming that the question refers to their country of birth. It is important to record Indigenous status for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descendants only.

Who has the right to say they’re Indigenous?

This is the definition as handed down by High Court of Australia:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of:

- 1. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent*
- 2. who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and*
- 3. is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.*

In administrative datasets we are only concerned with point #2, self-identification.

Your role is to give every person the opportunity to identify their Indigenous origin, nothing more. People are not required to ‘prove’ their Aboriginality, simply ask the question and record the answer.

How do we collect Indigenous status information?

The incorrect, though common way we might identify if someone is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin is by observing the patient's physical features, their name, address, clothing or person accompanying them.

The **ONLY** effective and accurate way to identify someone of Aboriginal origin is to **ask** the question. *“Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?” “Is your baby of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?”*

The exact wording of the question has been developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and has been adopted as the national standard for collecting Indigenous Status in administrative datasets, such as hospital collections, the Census, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, education, and many more. By asking the same question in the same way across all collections, an increase in the reliability of the data will result.

How to handle difficult situations

Be confident. There is nothing discriminatory about asking the question of Indigenous Status. It is the same as asking a person their age, sex or country of birth. So ask the question in a confident, matter-of-fact way.

Be sensitive. Respect a patient's privacy and choice of disclosure.

Reassure the patient that their information will be handled in confidence and that the service they receive will not be affected by the answer they give.

Show empathy. Acknowledge additional anxiety that may be contributing as a result of their visit.

Explain why we need to collect the information; it may be helpful to have prepared answers.

Suggested prepared answers

- ◆ Are you/your baby of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?
- ♥ **Why do you need that information?**
- ◆ It's a government requirement that I **ask** the question. The information is important for improving Aboriginal health.
- ♥ **Do I look Aboriginal to you?**
- ◆ It's not my place to make assumptions. It's a government requirement that I **ask** the question of every woman I see.
- ♥ **Yes I am. How is my information going to be used?**
- ◆ The de-identified data is used by government to monitor health patterns and provide services where they are most needed.
- ♥ **Why should they (Aboriginal people) get special treatment?**
- ◆ I can appreciate your concerns, but collecting this information does not change the service you receive. It simply allows health planners to find out why the health status and life expectancy of Aboriginal people is poorer than that of the whole population.