

**DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES  
KOORI HUMAN SERVICES UNIT**

**PRINCIPLES OF RECORDING ABORIGINAL STATUS  
IN VICTORIA<sup>1</sup>**

*27.04.2004*

**1 Scope**

The Principles of Recording Aboriginal Status are applicable to all data systems that the Department of Human Services (DHS) mandates, whether directly or through funded agencies.

**2 Purpose**

Data including Aboriginal Status is collected for service planning and purchasing, policy development and research purposes, to monitor and address the many and serious health and welfare disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal people as a group.

Data is collected from all Department of Human Services direct services and funded agencies for use by the Department. Data may also be used by the agency for the purposes of providing or referring to an appropriate service.

The purpose of the data collection and persons that will have access to the data must be explained to the client at the time that he/she is asked about Aboriginal status. The client should also be informed that the answer given or refusal to answer the question would not affect the client's access to the service.

DHS also has obligations to provide data under Commonwealth/State Agreements and through protocols developed between DHS and Aboriginal community agencies such as the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). However it should be noted that the requirements for Commonwealth reporting might in some cases not comply with the agreed national standard for recording "Aboriginal Status".

**3 Definition**

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is defined<sup>2</sup> as a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, who identifies as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) definition also requires that the person is accepted as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander by the community with which the person associates. DHS requires this level of identification only

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<sup>1</sup> In this context Aboriginal Status refers to persons identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

<sup>2</sup> In the National Health Data Dictionary, version 12; National Community Services Data Dictionary, version 2; and National Housing Assistance Data Dictionary, version 2.

for persons applying for public housing through the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria.

A person of Aboriginal descent is a person descended from the original inhabitants of Australia.

The Torres Strait Islands are the islands directly to the north of Cape York, between Cape York and New Guinea. They do not include:

- Christmas and Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean;
- Islands in the Gulf of Carpentaria;
- Pacific Ocean islands such as the Solomon Islands, Nauru, Kiribati, Samoa, New Hebrides, Tonga, Cook Islands or Fiji;
- Islands in Bass Strait, e.g. King or Flinders Islands.

#### **4 Aim**

The aim is for DHS to collect comprehensive and accurate data on the Aboriginal status of service users by ensuring that:

- a Every Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is given the opportunity on all occasions of service (both direct DHS services and funded agencies) to identify him/ herself (or person for whom responsible) as Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander.
- b Processes are in place to ensure that data systems are internally consistent, i.e. that data recorded on Aboriginal status does not conflict with data on country of birth, language spoken, citizenship or other fields relating to ethnic identity. In this context it is considered very unlikely that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person accessing Victorian services will have been born overseas or speak a language other than English or an Australian Indigenous language.

The response recorded by DHS and its funded agencies will not be influenced by whether the client's Aboriginal status is endorsed by others in the Victorian Aboriginal community, except in the case of applicants to the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria.

#### **5 Privacy**

It is the responsibility of DHS to ensure that Departmental privacy principles are adhered to.

The Department of Human Services has an endorsed privacy policy, which applies to the handling of all personal information, within the organisation and across the funded sector. The policy contains 12 information privacy principles which ensure privacy is maintained from the time information is collected, in any subsequent use and disclosure, and in the storage, retention and disposal of the information. The principles ensure that individuals have a right to access their personal information and the opportunity to correct or comment on its accuracy. They also provide guidance on the use of unique identifiers and require privacy compliance audits. The principles are based on an individual's right to know about what happens with his/her information and to be given a choice where possible about how it is handled, while at the same time explicitly recognising other public interests. They highlight the need to demonstrate cultural sensitivity

when handling information such as data on Aboriginal status, and awareness of the historically based, legitimate concerns clients may have about misuse, stigmatisation and a loss of control over the use of this information. The DHS privacy principles can be found at [www.dhs.vic.gov.au/corpres/privacy/index.htm](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/corpres/privacy/index.htm).

## 6 Collection

a All areas of DHS and funded agencies which collect client information must collect information on Aboriginal status. This information is part of the Department's common client data standards, which require that Aboriginal Status and Country of Birth are recorded in all data collections.

b The question on Aboriginal status should be asked immediately following the question "Country of Birth". If the person was born in Australia, then information on Aboriginal status should be collected by asking the question "Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?"

The response to the question should be recorded in the format:

[Are you]	Aboriginal;	(A)
	Torres Strait Islander;	(TSI)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander;	(A/TSI)
	Not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander;	(not A/TSI)
	Declined to answer; or	
	*Question not able to be asked.	

It should not be possible for the response to be recorded as "not stated/ unknown/ not applicable", except as in 6i below.

\*The response "question not able to be asked" should be used only:

- in an emergency situation by ambulance or hospital staff; and
- when the patient is incapable of answering questions, and
- when no other person can answer on his/her behalf and it is not possible to obtain the information later and amend the record.

This will only be available in a limited number of databases.

c Data should be aggregated in the same format as above (A, TSI, A/TSI, not A/TSI, Declined to answer).

d There should be a field in the above format on every data collection tool.

e The field should be mandatory, i.e. that it must be completed for the entry to be accepted by the system. This should be implemented as systems are redeveloped and upgraded.

f It should not be possible for the system to default to a particular response in this field.

g The information should be collected by directly asking the client at every episode of care/ occasion of service, as defined by normal practice within the program area. Where a single "permanent" record is provided through a Patient Master Index (PMI) this field should be checked at each episode (in the same way as address or next of kin would be checked).

In a situation where the client will make frequent regular visits in a short period of time, (e.g. dialysis) it is acceptable (where technically possible) to

program a prompt to appear for this question so that the information must be updated periodically, e.g. weekly or monthly, rather than at every visit.

While a person's Aboriginal origin does not change over time, a person's decision to identify as Aboriginal may vary at different times. The client should be offered the opportunity to confirm or change any previously recorded identification.

- h At the time of collection the client should be provided with the reason that data is collected, the destination of the data, who will have access to the data and whether it will be linked with any other data system. This includes both the collection of data for statistical purposes by DHS, and any use the agency may make of the data. If the client challenges the need for collection of Aboriginal status, the following information should be provided:
  - what data is collected;
  - how data is collected;
  - why data is collected;
  - why the data is important;
  - who has access to the data.
  - what safeguards are placed on the confidentiality of the data.
- i The option "not stated" should not be provided in primary data collections. The only situation in which this option should be used is where data is converted from a system that has not recorded information on Aboriginal status, or has recorded it in an incompatible format.

## **7 Quality**

- a Aboriginal status should be cross-checked with Country of Birth and Language. An error should be flagged if the country of birth is other than Australia and the language spoken is other than English or an Australian Indigenous language. While neither of these situations is impossible, they are considered so unlikely that their occurrence should be cause for further investigation.
- b Where it is possible for identification to be supported by reference to other data series and persons with specialist knowledge, such as Koori Hospital Liaison Officers, this verification should be sought as an additional indication of the quality and completeness of the aggregated data collection. However, rejection of identification by the external source should be cause only to check how identification was sought and whether it was recorded correctly, not to invalidate the client's identification. The only exception to this is in the case of applicants to the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria.

## **8 Community consultation**

- a Work on improving the collection and accuracy of Victorian Aboriginal data must occur in co-operation with the Victorian Aboriginal community. The involvement of the Victorian Aboriginal community is essential to improve data collection. However this cannot be achieved without community confidence in the accuracy of the data collected, and trust that information will not be abused and privacy will be protected.
- b Protocols for the use of data and for returning information to the Victorian Aboriginal community will be developed in consultation with Victorian

Aboriginal community organisations. DHS has an obligation to articulate and negotiate with the community the benefits, safeguards and risks of such data collection.

- c Different protocols will apply to different levels of data use, i.e. individual, collected and aggregated data.
- d While the Department has an obligation to return data to the Victorian Aboriginal community, only data that does not identify individuals or small communities will be made available beyond DHS, including to Victorian Aboriginal community organisations.

## **9 Exceptions**

- a If DHS staff consider that a system should be exempt from collecting information on Aboriginal status they must prove due cause, such as:
  - the difficulties of collecting data in emergency situations;
  - that data on Aboriginal identification is not used presently and never will be used within DHS; or
  - that collecting data would compromise service delivery.
- b If an individual refuses to answer the question about Aboriginal status, he/she should be recorded as "Declined to answer". Service use of this option will be monitored closely.

If it is impossible for the question to be asked during the contact episode, Aboriginal status should be recorded as "Question not able to be asked" rather than one of "A, TSI, A/TSI or not A/TSI". (see 6b above). This option will only be available in specified databases.

If possible, further information should be sought from the client or his/her advocate and the response amended.

## **10 Use of data**

- a Aggregated data will only be used for service provision and purchasing, policy development, research and planning purposes. It will be accompanied by a statement about the accuracy of the data.
- b An individual's identification as Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander or not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander will not affect the level of service available to that individual, although the type of service may vary as appropriate, e.g. referrals to a Aboriginal-specific agency may be made.
- c Record linking  
In order to check the accuracy and completeness of data, it may be necessary to use data identifying individuals; i.e. to use names to check the consistency of identification across systems. This will occur only while accuracy is being checked.

The Departmental Privacy Principles apply to any personal information collected. When the purpose of data collection is research the normal Departmental research protocols will also apply.

On occasions when data has been linked across systems, e.g. Aboriginal births data, the results have provided an excellent measure of accuracy of the systems.

## **11 Implementation**

- a When the Principles have been formally adopted by the Department, their implementation will become the general responsibility of relevant Koori Services strategy groups.
- b A quality control group will be identified to meet as required.
- c The level and distribution of resources required to implement the Principles will be determined. It is recognised that training and development will be required across the Department and its agencies.

**KOORI INFORMATION PLAN STEERING COMMITTEE**

**April 2004**