

Position Statement

19 July 2021

Importance of Indigenous representation in university medical societies

The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) is the peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students and doctors in Australia. AIDA's membership includes doctors across a wide and growing range of medical specialities. Our purpose is to contribute to equitable health and life outcomes, and the cultural wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We do this by striving to reach population parity of Indigenous medical students and doctors and supporting a culturally safe healthcare system.

Increasing the number of Indigenous doctors as a means of providing culturally safe care to improve the health status of Indigenous Australians is a national priority – and one supported by governments as well as bodies such as the AMA and the medical colleges. By extension, university medical societies also have a positive role to play in acknowledging and supporting Indigenous medical students.

The experience of Indigenous representation on medical societies to date

Many Indigenous medical students who have held these positions in their respective medical societies have observed that the role:

- felt tokenistic;
- carried too much responsibility for one person; and
- made one feel isolated and reluctant to raise issues without support from other Indigenous students who were having similar experiences.

Moreover, AIDA is aware that in some instances the role of the Indigenous representative has been filled by a student who does not identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. While these individuals may undoubtedly be supportive of their Indigenous peers it is, nevertheless, not appropriate for them to advocate on behalf of the Indigenous cohort.

AIDA Position

In order to address both the real and perceived appearance of tokenism within medical societies, AIDA believes there should be a number of identified roles with at least one position on the Executive Committee.

Having an Indigenous position on the Executive Committee would allow the occupant to engage in non-Indigenous specific topics, have a voice and a leadership role as an Indigenous student, raise the visibility of the role and lead to increased cultural awareness of students.

Additional Indigenous roles, moreover, would also mean that responsibilities can be shared and future Indigenous students are not discouraged from taking on these positions.

A possible role for non-Indigenous representatives – where positions would otherwise be vacant

In circumstances where there are insufficient numbers of Indigenous medical students prepared to take up all of their representative positions, there may be a case for a non-Indigenous student to occupy an Indigenous role provided that an Indigenous student is filling the senior position and thus can provide appropriate guidance on Indigenous matters. In scenarios where the senior Indigenous role remains vacant, however, it would not be appropriate for a non-Indigenous student to solely “represent” the Indigenous cohort and as such all positions should remain vacant.

AIDA strongly advocates for medical societies to include a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified roles with at least one position on the Executive Committee.

This position statement has been developed by the AIDA Student Representative Committee (SRC). The SRC provides guidance on the development of initiatives that support our student membership, and comprises Indigenous medical student representatives from Australian medical universities.

for more information see <https://www.aida.org.au/studying-medicine/student-support/>