



**AIDA**  
AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS  
DOCTORS' ASSOCIATION



# IGILYAWA 2024 REPORT

*Custodians of Life*



**Presented by:**

Wave of Change Consultancy PTY LTD





***AIDA acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the lands across Australia on which our members live and work, and to the Elders and ancestors, past, present and emerging.***





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# 1. Introduction

This report serves to document and share an overview and key recommendations from AIDA's second 'Igilyawa: Custodians of Life' visit to the Torres Strait Islands undertaken from 28 April to 3 May 2024.

The intended audience of this report includes 2024 delegates who participated in the visit, Torres Strait Islander communities, AIDA members, valued sponsors and other interested parties.

*“Bring our people home.” – Mr. Robert Sagigi*

Held on Waiben (Thursday Island) in the Torres Strait, AIDA brought home seventeen (17) Torres Strait Islander doctors and three (3) Torres Strait Islander medical students.

The Igilyawa: Custodians of Life focussed on these core elements:

- **Celebration of a new Nationhood** of Torres Strait Islander doctors
- **Waken Wyan and Okadikes** of cultural lead/professional identity as Torres Strait Islander doctors.
- **Consolidation, Leadership and Healing** being home in your journey.
- **Sibwana/Omar** - reciprocity of knowledge and gifts. Knowledge exchange with Elders, young people at schools and peers.

***Igilyawa meaning:** Custodians of life.*



*At opening of event*  
**2. Address given  
by AIDA CEO**

**Donna Burns**

It is a great honour to be here on Waiben today on the lands of the The Kaurareg People. I pay my respects to the Kaurareg peoples, nearby traditional owners, past and present, and to the beautiful land, sea and skys that wrap around, and hold tight, this beautiful Country.

I am honoured to be able to open this culturally significant week-long program – Igilyawa.

This beautiful term was gifted to us by local Elders in 2003, which was the first time the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association brought a group of Indigenous doctors to the Torres Strait. This term was regifted to us on this occasion, as a wonderful, strong connection to that first visit, as we now bring 20 doctors and medical students home. Igilyawa, appropriately translates to Custodians of Life.

For us, Igilyawa, is a celebration of Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students.

We are also very grateful to the Elders and leaders in the room, including Pastor Pedro Stephens, Mr Willie Wignes, Associate Professor Uncle Phillip Mills and Mr Robert Sagigi.

We are also grateful to be joined here in the room by the Honourable Malarndirri McCarthy Assistant Minister for Indigenous Australians and Assistant Minister for Indigenous Health. Your attendance today truly demonstrates your commitment to, and understanding of the work of the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, and more importantly, the strength and safety, both clinically and culturally, that comes with a Torres Strait Islander medical workforce.



***'A Heartfelt  
experience.'***

***'impactful for  
the workforce,  
but more so for  
the  
individuals.'***

# *Continued* **Address given by AIDA CEO**

I would also like to extend a thank you to the Honourable Shannon Fentiman Minister for Health, Mental Health and Ambulance Services and Minister for Women for her support of this project. Although Minister Fentiman was unable to be here today, she did send across a video address.

This all started when Uncle Phillip gently pulled me aside last July at the Lowitja Conference. He brought in reinforcements in the form of Dr Mark Wenitong, and together they suggested Igilyawa 2024. How could I say no?

They knew that this could be powerful, and they were right. It is truly amazing to have a representation of Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students, here, each of whom makes a profound impact to the delivery of healthcare and therefore, health outcomes. We actually know this, it comes from our hearts and it comes from the evidence.

A large part of why we are here is to ensure reciprocity of knowledge and gifts. Our commitment to the importance of Knowledge exchange with Community, Elders, and young people ensures we respectfully give back to the community. We hope to do this by inspiring the next generation through meeting and yarning with Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students.

It is incredible to think of how delegates and Community may feel at the end of this week.

Before I wrap up, I want to express my gratitude for those who have helped make Igilyawa possible:

- The Torres Strait Regional Authority
- Queensland Health
- North Queensland Primary Health Network
- Medibank/Ampliar Health
- Health Workforce Queensland
- Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine

I also want to thank Dr Karen Nicholls, Professor Jacqi Hughes, Dr Julian Conboy and Dr Alicia Veasey who worked together as the Torres Strait Islander steering group for Igilyawa. They dedicated their time and knowledge to help make this happen.

Thank you for the ongoing support of AIDA, our Board and our team, this is no small feat. Also, the Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students who have open heartedly embraced this opportunity.



*At opening of event*  
**Address given by  
AIDA President**

**Dr Simone Raye**



I am honored to address you as President of AIDA. It has been 20 years since AIDA first came to the Torres Strait in July 2003 when AIDA held one of its first Symposiums here. We are so grateful for the invitation to bring our members back to this beautiful Country on the lands of the Kaurareg People and continue to create memories we will cherish.

It is truly amazing to know there are now 127 Torres Strait Islander doctors registered as medical practitioners (according to Ahpra data), with Dr Roy Whittaker being the first, having graduated in 1996 from the University of Queensland.

Each of you plays a vital role in providing quality healthcare wherever you practice, leading me to express my deepest gratitude to you for your dedication, expertise, and compassion. Your commitment to improving the health outcomes of First Nations communities is truly commendable.

The themes of this trip include Inspiration and Role Modelling. By bringing 20 Torres Strait Islander doctors and students to Country, we aim to inspire and empower the younger generations within Community. These accomplished medical professionals will serve as role models, demonstrating the potential for success that lies within.

The Igilyawa: Custodians of Life 2024 program is a celebration that aims to create an opportunity for reciprocity through cultural exchange and clinical leadership.

We know that while we intend to give so much, we will inevitably learn so much from Elders, leaders and locals alike. We cannot thank you enough in advance for your time, energy and willingness to share with us. The experience of returning to Country will enhance our experiences of traditional practices, values, and heritage. This cultural enrichment will positively impact our doctors and students approach to patient care and Community engagement well beyond this trip. And finally, we cannot underestimate the importance of Community Connection. By establishing and strengthening connections between healthcare providers and Community we can improve healthcare outcomes. This program will facilitate dialogue, understanding, and trust-building between these key stakeholders.

I am personally so thrilled to be here, and I know how deeply heartfelt this opportunity is for every person present today, so thank you for welcoming AIDA into your community once again. Together, we can continue to make a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians in the Torres Strait. and students.

# 3. Acknowledgements

This report honours the connections made, knowledge shared and learning had by Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students who attended Igilyawa 2024.

The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association thanks all who attended, contributed and made the 5 days possible. A deep gratitude to the Kaurareg people for welcoming us all.

## Special Guests

### Health Ministers

Senator the Hon. Malarndirri McCarthy, Assistant Minister for Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Health

Hon. Shannon Fentiman (video message), Minister for Health, Mental Health and Ambulance Services and Minister for Women

### Torres Strait Islander Leader and Elders

Mr. Willie Wigness, Kaurareg Elder

Mr. Robert Bongo Sagigi, Wakaid Elder

Associate Professor Phillip Mills, MPH, FRACP (Hons), OAM Kulkalgai Elder

Mr. Napau Pedro Stephen, AM, Chairperson Torres Strait Regional Authority

### AIDA Secretariat

Donna Burns, CEO

Jaylene Chevalier, COO

Stephanie May, Director - Programs and Outcomes

Kelly Kildea, Senior Project Officer

Samara Williams, Senior Membership Experience Officer

### AIDA Board

Dr Simone Raye, AIDA President

### External

Scribe and Report Consolidator - Lateesha Jeffrey, Wave of Change Consultancy Pty Ltd

Videographer - Lewis Bin Doraho, Lewis James Media

Photographer - Daniel Fewquandie, Wombat Vision





AIDA acknowledges the contributions of the people and organisations who made the Igilyawa Custodians of Life 2024 visit possible.

### **AIDA Board**

#### **Igilyawa Steering Group**

Professor Jaquelyne Hughes

Dr Karen Nicholls

Dr Alicia Veasey

Dr Julian Conboy

Associate Professor Phillip Mills

Donna Burns

Christine Carriage

Stephanie May

Kelly Kildea

# 4. Delegates

**Professor Jaquelyne Hughes**

**Dr Alicia Veasey**

**Dr Jodi Eatt**

**Dr Danielle Arabena**

**Dr Karen Nicholls**

**Dr Rebecca Fatnowna**

**Dr Robert Blackley**

**Dr Patricia Mulholland**

**Dr Tionne Seden**

**Dr Hannah Wood**

**Dr Joshua Preece**

**Dr Loyola Wills**

**Dr Karlie James**

**Dr Megan Shuttleworth**

**Dr Julian Conboy**

**Dr Sarita Lawler**

**Dr Taslena Tapim**

**Mr Jackson Corona**

**Miss Kiris Reid**

**Miss Jade Abernethy**



# 5. Executive Summary

## IGILYAWA 2024: CELEBRATING THE GROWTH AND UNITY OF TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DOCTORS

In 2003, AIDA led its first delegation to the Torres Strait, with only four (4) Torres Strait Islander doctors in attendance; Dr Karen Nicholls, Dr Roy Whittaker, Dr Latisha Patterson and Dr Helena Van Hooren. Now, over two decades later, there are 127 registered Torres Strait Islander doctors, with 17 attending Igilyawa 2024. This event was intended to mark a significant milestone in the journey of cultural restoration, professional development, and the celebration of a new nationhood for Torres Strait Islander doctors.

Over five days on Waiben and in the Northern Peninsula Area, Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students intentionally engaged in cultural immersion as a collective.

The focus on culture was undertaken through storytelling, family connections, interaction with Country, traditional food, and dance, delegates strengthened their connection with their cultural identity. The event facilitated knowledge exchanges with Elders, community members, schools, and peers, fostering deep connections and mutual understanding.

Each day of the weeklong program, Igilyawa brought a focal activity for delegates to learn from and share with each other. Key activities in the program included:

- Community engagement and inspiring the next generation through participation at school career days on Waiben and in Bamaga.
- A community dinner and a morning tea hosted by AIDA.
- Knowledge exchanges and informal engagements with Elders and community members.
- Media coverage in the Torres Strait and beyond with Radio 4MW and SBS News.

The Igilyawa 2024 program supported delegates to strengthen their relationships with one another, through family lines and culture as Torres Strait Islander people, which is an enduring cultural protocol of Torres Strait Islander culture. This collective identity fostered unity, support, and the resolve to overcome challenges and celebrate achievements.

# Executive Summary *Continued*

## IGILYAWA 2024: CELEBRATING THE GROWTH AND UNITY OF TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DOCTORS

The program provided space and time for delegates to reflect on their professional journeys and roles and consider collective and individual ways to promote the health of Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Igilyawa 2024 event was a transformative experience, confirming a new Nationhood of Clinical excellence within Torres Strait Islander people, and will be remembered as a significant occasion, that will catalyse medical workforce growth, leadership and new collaborations.



# 6. Reflections on the four purposes of Igilyawa 2024

## CELEBRATION OF A NEW NATIONHOOD OF TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DOCTORS

Travelling from many locations, delegates are at different points on both their cultural and medical journeys, however all shared one powerful and grounding thing in common; they're proud descendants from the Torres Strait Islands.

A strength that was evident during Igilyawa was the ability delegates had to 'find family in each other'. Having the opportunity, time and space to connect, share and learn from one another, both as medical and in the cultural context was empowering.

*"I stand in my pride."*

Often, delegates are the only Indigenous doctor or medical student in their place of work, so it isn't surprising to recognise how impactful bringing twenty (20) Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students together. Over the 5 days, delegates shared the challenges they've had during their medical journey, how they've overcome or perhaps been met with lack of solutions, and supported each other through the conversations. It was a knowledge exchange like no other, one that was relatable, and met with empathy and empowering words for what has and will continue to be overcome. Achievements and triumphant moments that were celebrated, instilling confidence in others to continue on their journey, now knowing that someone before them has done it.

A solution that emerged as experiences were shared, was to not isolate themselves and to seek allyship on all levels. Allies who support individuals and demonstrate same practice.

Igilyawa has allowed the opportunity for delegates to reset, reflect and refocus. Confidence and pride has been instilled in delegates to continue each of their medical journey, weaving in the strengths of their culture and identity, knowing they now have a new nationhood of Torres Strait Islander doctors to continue to support them.

*'Let's move forward – we have a new group that will take us forward.'*

- Associate Professor Phillip Mills



## WAKEN WYAN AND OKADIKES OF CULTURAL LEAD/PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AS TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DOCTORS

Delegates explored and discovered their cultural and professional identities. Sharing stories on navigating medical training and biomedical clinical care contexts and the barriers and opportunities faced.

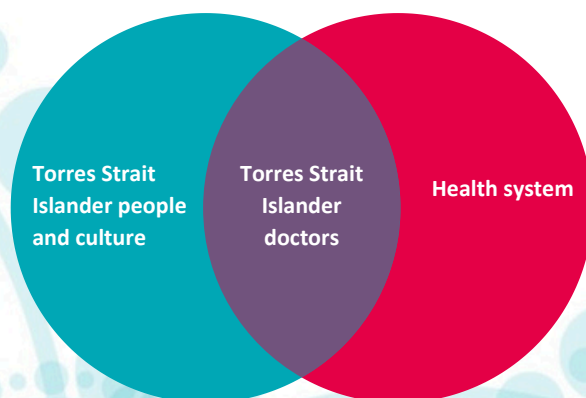
Torres Strait Islander doctors have an enriched way of being and doing, and Igilyawa enabled them to restore, and for some discover this part of them. Many are the first in their families to be in medicine, however some are second generation, which speaks to the generational change that can occur once one ‘walks’ and ‘shapes the line’ as described by Pedro Stephen.

***‘You change – community change – you design the change.  
... because others will walk and talk like you.’***

**-Pedro Stephen**

Delegates shared the challenge of being a Torres Strait Islander doctor, both from a systems and a communities needs perspective. They spoke of being ‘overwhelmed with getting tasked with all indigenous matters’, in addition to their responsibility as a medical practitioner. These matters ranged from planning/leading NAIDOC and reconciliation events, being lent on for Indigenous matters that arise in their places of work, and also being put in a box for identified positions for ‘what they (the system) need – not what I’m (the delegate are) capable of.’. In contrast, there is also a reliance and/ or preference of delegates from Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait islander clients, patients and the wider community. This comes from a place of feeling safe, having a Torres Strait Islander doctor, this kind of trust and connection takes time to be established with non- Indigenous doctors.

Among many valuable perspectives and concepts shared, there were some powerful messages shared by Elders such as ‘absorb the cultural responsibility’, ‘Mobilise knowledge (medical) – bring in to the fold of cultural protocol.’



# CONSOLIDATION, LEADERSHIP AND HEALING BEING HOME IN YOUR JOURNEY

A foundation, for what would set the tone for the week, was established from day one (1) on Waiben, with Elders, delegates and guests echoing the significance of this journey home for all doctors and medical students. Whether it was their first time or one of many times home to visit and connect with family, it was an opportunity shared together for the first time to consolidate their knowledge and experiences. Demonstrating, practicing and elevating their leadership through professional and cultural learning delivered as 'Show and Share' sessions led by delegates, as well as opportunities provided in speaking informally at careers expos, in addition to panel discussions, knowledge circles and the community gathering.

## *'Cultural awakening'*

Delegates were taken on an entertaining, educational and spiritual journey with the Island Stars, participating in traditional; dance, storytelling, food, songs and music.

Cultural immersions were had throughout the week, but a highlight was an evening, opened to community and Elders, where delegates were welcomed with a table full of traditional food and dances performed together. An evening well spent, rounding off a long day of meaningful exchanges.

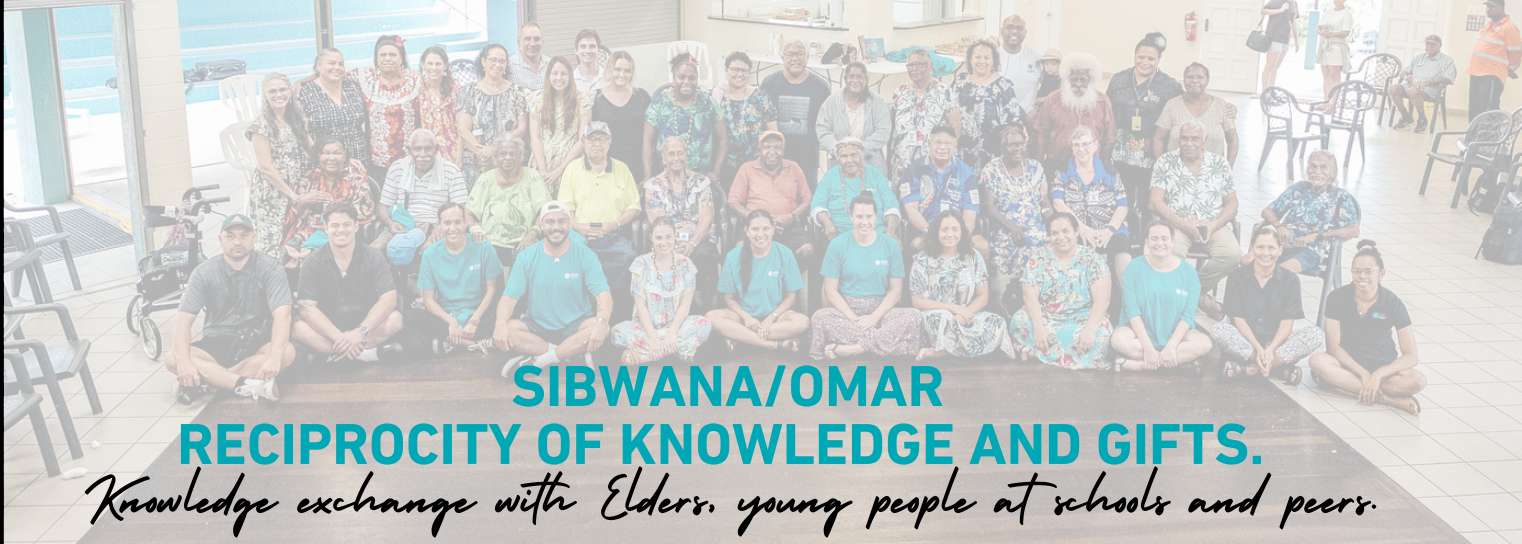


## *'Your home is your identity.' – 'Equip yourself with cultural tools.'*

Sharing in the deep unpacking and conceptualising of cultural competence, responsibility and solution, delegates were able to 'consolidate' their 'cultural authority together' as was hoped for on the opening day by Professor Jaquelyne Hughes.

The journey to the Torres Strait, involved reflections as to how Torres Strait Islander families live in all areas of Australia, but that our blood line comes from Kaiwalagal - our Country.

The journey also reflected on few opportunities of Torres Strait islander people, as medical students and doctors to serve in clinical roles and clinical leadership in the Torres Strait. This was shared by delegates and community.



## SIBWANA/OMAR RECIPROCITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND GIFTS.

*Knowledge exchange with Elders, young people at schools and peers.*

Reciprocity was spoken of throughout the week, and intentionally woven into all professional and cultural activities and engagements. Exchanges were insightful, with a balance of cultural and medical journeys, as well as the challenges from both community perspective and the limitations as medical practitioners. Allowing the opportunity to vocalise their stories, with potential to elevate localised strategies with community experiences and needs at the heart of conversations, including a medical lens on how it can be implemented.

Within learning and sharing settings, Elders and community members spoke with doctors and medical students about experiences in care, and health issues across the Torres Strait Islands. In particular, having to leave country to get the required medical assistance needed, as well as health demands not being met due to a lack of capacity of health providers. Hearing these concerns were insightful for the Torres Strait Islander doctors, who all worked in various settings on the mainland, including community controlled organisations, GP clinics and hospitals. At the time of the visit, there were no Torres Strait Islander doctors in the Torres Strait, which community members, health workers and stakeholders mentioned throughout the week.

***'Blessing of accountability to your home.'***

Inspiring and empowering younger generations was a priority of the program. The range and depth of clinical expertise held by the Torres Strait Islander delegates and concentrated within Torres Strait and NPA for the week, was shared with young people at AIDA booths at Careers days at both the Tagai Secondary College and Northern Peninsula Area State College, Bamaga Campus. The doctors also informally shared their experiences and expertise with community including at the Football carnival.

When walking around and between venues on Waiben, delegates were approached by Torres Strait Islander people, making connections to families and sharing stories. With one Elder expressing the 'Trust' that is felt when seeing Torres Strait Islander doctors. There was an early notion of 'passing on the baton', from Elders to the next generation of Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students. A message to capture and carry forward the stories and strategies that have been implemented but lost over time. Working together to improve the health of Torres Strait Islander people.

***'When asked to be the black girl for the picture - I stand in my pride for the girls from home to see me.'***

# 7. Key findings

## Shared Cultural Heritage

Delegates, though at different points in their journeys, shared a strong, grounding connection to their Torres Strait Islander heritage. This common identity fostered a sense of unity and family among them.

## Empowerment through Connection

The event provided a unique opportunity for delegates to connect, share, and learn from one another in both medical and cultural contexts, which was particularly empowering for those often isolated as the sole Indigenous doctors or medical students in their workplaces.

## Support and Knowledge Exchange

Delegates shared challenges and solutions from their medical journeys, supporting each other through empathetic and empowering conversations. This exchange of relatable knowledge and experiences was impactful.

## Importance of Allyship

A key solution that emerged was the importance of seeking and relying on allies at all levels to support individuals and demonstrate shared practices.

## Rediscovering Professional and Cultural Identities

Delegates explored their traditional and professional identities, sharing stories about navigating mainstream roles and the barriers faced. The event enabled them to restore or discover their enriched way of being and doing as Torres Strait Islander doctors.

## Cultural and Medical Responsibility

Delegates discussed the dual challenges of being tasked with Indigenous matters in their workplaces while also being trusted and preferred by Indigenous patients due to cultural safety and connection. Elders emphasised absorbing cultural responsibility and mobilising medical knowledge within cultural protocols.

# Key findings *Continued*

## Consolidation of Leadership Skills

The journey home provided an opportunity for delegates to consolidate their knowledge and experiences, practice leadership, and engage in cultural immersions, which reinforced their cultural authority and understanding.

## Cultural Awakening

Cultural immersions, such as traditional dance, storytelling, and food, deepened delegates' understanding of their heritage and allowed them to consolidate their cultural authority together.

## Reciprocity and Community Engagement

The concept of reciprocity was woven throughout the event, with balanced exchanges of cultural and medical knowledge. Delegates listened to community concerns, which highlighted the need for more Torres Strait Islander doctors in the region to address health issues and capacity gaps.

## Inspiration and Empowerment for Future Generations

The presence of Torres Strait Islander doctors inspired and empowered younger generations within the community, demonstrating the potential for success and fostering trust. Elders emphasised passing on stories and strategies to improve the health of Torres Strait Islander people.



# 8. Outcomes

## FEEDBACK FROM DELEGATES

AIDA undertook a survey of delegates at the conclusion of Igilyawa 2024 to understand the value of the visit for the delegates who attended.

Of the delegates who responded:

**91% indicated that the visit to Waiben and Bamaga was of *value* to them.**

Furthermore, as a result of their participation in Igilyawa 2024, the collated responses from delegates showed that:

**100% *agreed* that they were considering ways to further contribute to the health needs of Torres Strait Islander communities.**

**90% *agreed* that their cultural understanding had deepened.**

**82% *agreed* they were more likely to pursue work in the Torres Strait in the future.**

**82% *agreed* that they felt more capable as a Torres Strait Islander practitioner in medicine following the visit**





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***We thank you for your support and contribution to  
Igilyawa Custodians of Life 2024.***

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