

The Leading Voice of Nutrition *in Australia*



Image (used with permission) of women collecting rock oysters and fishing at a women's cultural camp in One Arm Point on the Dampier Peninsula in WA.



Dietitians
Australia

A guide to strengths-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communications

Prepared by the Indigenous Nutrition Interest Group

Purpose

To provide a guide for dietitians in approaching respectful and strengths-based communication with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through terminology and vocabulary choice. Preferences in terminology will vary across Australia for individuals, communities and agencies and can evolve over time and this guide will need to be updated as appropriate. This guide is consistent with the Dietitians Australia 'Writing Style Guide' (April 2021) for staff.

Given the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Australia, it is encouraged to seek the advice of relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, partners, communities or agencies regarding preferences and protocols around terminology to ensure you communicate in a culturally safe manner. Cultural capability is a lifelong journey, which involves continual learning.

Rationale

In line with Dietitian Australia's 'Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan' (RAP), our peak organisation seeks to guide dietitians to use respectful and appropriate terminology. Action point six of the RAP states: *Engage employees in continuous cultural learning opportunities to increase understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and achievements.* One of the deliverables of this action is to: *Promote the correct use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander terminology to our staff and members.*

Scope

For use by all dietitians in all communications including (but not limited to) policy documents, planning programs, resource development and published materials, social media communications, informal and formal research and related documents.

Strengths-based focus

Strengths-based approaches to communication acknowledge the resilience and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and communities. It is important that our communication and language choice reflects these strengths. A strengths-based approach attempts to counter ‘deficit discourse’ where communication represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in terms of deficiency, failure or being problematic and does not appropriately acknowledge the significant role broader social determinants and institutional racism have on health outcomes.

For example, there is a difference between a more deficit approach such as “helping disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people improve their nutrition”, and a more strengths-based alternative such as “strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples access to healthy foods”.

Use of Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country terminology

A ‘Welcome to Country’ is a ceremony where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are the Traditional Owners or Custodians, welcome people to their land⁷.

You can check if your organisation has a protocol for ‘Welcome to Country’ to help guide you in arranging a ‘Welcome to Country’ for events.

An ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ can be done by everyone to pay respect to the fact that one is on traditional land. An ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ is a way to respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which a gathering, meeting, or presentation is taking place⁹. Check if your organisation has a policy or guideline for an ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ statement.

Terms not to be used

The below terminology is offensive and should never be used when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Unacceptable terms include:

- Full blood
- Half-caste
- Part-Aboriginal/Indigenous
- Mixed blood
- Quarter-caste
- Native
- ATSI - it is considered disrespectful to use this acronym
- Aborigine, Aborigines (noun) - these words are associated with colonisation and assimilation and are distressing to many people.
- Referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as ‘them’ or ‘they’ or ‘those people’ or ‘you people’ can be divisive and can objectify the people you are referring to. Ensure your language is inclusive to create a sense of unity.

Note: The term “Indigenous” can be considered offensive in some parts of the country due to its historical use to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of the ‘flora/fauna’ rather than the human population of Australia. This term should always be capitalised.

This term should only be used when it is in the name of a title or a direct quote and cannot be changed. For example, “the National Indigenous Australians Agency released a Close the Gap report”. This term can also be used to identify people who are not Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. For example, “Non-Indigenous people”.

Guidelines for terminology

Use the correct language group name if possible

For example, “We wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people”.

The [Australian Indigenous Languages Database](#) from AIATSIS may help you identify the appropriate local language.

Use ‘First Australians’, ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People’ or ‘Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ (note the plural) if you are not sure of the local language group or are talking about multiple groups. For example, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have distinct identities, histories and cultural traditions”. First Australian is not generally used in reference to an individual.

First Nations

This term is also appropriate. First Nations refers to the collective of individual Nations in Australia. This is to be used when referring to all or some of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations in Australia. This term can be used instead of Indigenous. Note: all words in this term must start with a capital letter. The term must always be a plural.

First Peoples

This term can also be used. This refers to the collective of individual Nations in Australia and acknowledges those who may not know which nation they are from. This can be used when referring to some, or all, of the Indigenous Nations in Australia. This term can be used instead of Indigenous. Note: all words in this term must start with a capital letter. The term must always be a plural.

If appropriate you can use the terms ‘Aboriginal Peoples’ and ‘Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ on their own. For example, “The Aboriginal flag was created as a symbol of unity and national identity for Aboriginal Peoples during the land rights movement of the early 1970s”. “The Torres Strait Islander flag was created as a symbol of unity and identity for Torres Strait Islander Peoples”.

Community

Community is about interrelatedness and belonging and is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ way of being. Community can refer to a geographical location, where people come from (Country), their mob, extended family ties and shared experiences. It is most common to refer to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community within a geographical location, however the diversity of backgrounds, mobs, language groups and other differences within that community should be considered.

Elder

The traditional meaning of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elder is someone who has gained recognition within their community as a custodian of knowledge and lore, and who has permission to disclose cultural knowledge and beliefs. Elders are highly respected people within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is important to understand that in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, age alone does not necessarily mean that one is a recognised Elder.

Traditional Owners or Traditional Custodians

A ‘traditional owner or custodian’ is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or people directly descended from the original inhabitants of a culturally defined area of country. They have a cultural association with their country deriving from the traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of the area.

Aunty and Uncle

The use of ‘Aunty’ and ‘Uncle’ does not follow Western concepts of family. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, ‘Aunty’ and ‘Uncle’ can be used for extended family and may be used for aunts, uncles, cousins and other

blood relatives, as well as those married into a family. 'Aunty' and 'Uncle' can also be used to demonstrate respect for senior people in the community who are not necessarily a family member.

Under some circumstances it may be appropriate for a non-Indigenous person to address a senior Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person as 'Aunty' or 'Uncle', if the person has been introduced using the term 'Aunty' or 'Uncle' and/or when the person is personally known to them and an existing mutually respectful relationship exists⁹. If unsure, guidance should be sought from local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

Clan

The 'clan' is a local descent group, larger than a family but based on family links through a common ancestry. The term should be used with care, and only with local community guidance⁹.

Mob

'Mob' is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people associated with a particular place or Country. 'Mob' is an important term for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as it is used to describe who they are and where they are from. 'Mob' is generally used between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Therefore, it is not appropriate for non-Indigenous people to use this term, unless it is known to be acceptable².

Country

'Country' is a term used to describe a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular culturally distinct group of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Being 'on Country' means that you are on your traditional lands⁵.

Sorry Business

'Sorry Business' is the period of mourning or ceremony following the death of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. This is usually a solemn time with little spoken conversation and usual daily community activities may be stopped or postponed.

Men's and Women's Business

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture there are customs and practices that are performed by men and women separately. This gender-specific practice is often referred to as Men's and Women's Business. These practices have very strict rules. Men's and Women's Business includes matters relating to health, wellbeing, religious ceremony and maintenance of significant geographic sites and differs from community to community. Topics discussed during Men and Women's Business can differ between communities.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS)

An Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (also known as an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation) is a primary health care service initiated and operated by the local Aboriginal community to deliver holistic, comprehensive, and culturally appropriate health care to the community which controls it (through a locally elected Board of Management). The acronym can be used only after the term has been spelt out in full.

Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS)

An Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) is a health service funded principally to provide services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. An AMS is not necessarily community controlled; all ACCHSs are AMSs but the reverse is not the case. The acronym can be used only after the term has been spelt out in full.

References

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