

Guidance for NSW Health staff

Aboriginal Cultural Engagement during Open Disclosure Process

Aboriginal people¹ are distinct and diverse groups with unique cultural practices. Customary practices can vary significantly.

This document offers general guidance for NSW Health staff, recognising the diversity and cultural specificity of the groups that make up Aboriginal people.

Following an incident, the [open disclosure](#) process should be upheld in line with NSW Health guidelines² and practiced sensitively with Aboriginal families.

Open disclosure is a process for ensuring that open, honest, empathic and timely discussions occur between patients (and/or their support person) and health care staff after a patient safety incident.

What is Sorry Business and Sad News?

When an Aboriginal person experiences harm or loss, it has a flow-on effect across many families and communities.

Sorry Business and Sad News is a key Cultural³ practice in Aboriginal Communities, and a term used by Aboriginal people to represent the time of mourning.

Rooted in the concept of collective responsibility, it includes funerals and ceremonies that are guided by traditions and customs.

Sorry Business and Sad News can last for days, weeks, or longer, depending on cultural protocols and community customs.

During Sorry Business, families and community members may need to travel long distances to be with loved ones or participate in ceremonies.

Sorry Business may temporarily affect appointment attendance and responsiveness to telephone calls.

This may be due to travel, emotional and Cultural obligations. As such, health services should remain flexible and understanding of these commitments.

Acknowledge the historical impact

Cultural engagement considerations should account for historical, social, community, family, and individual factors, recognising that some issues may be deeply rooted.

The history of dispossession, racism, and systemic discrimination experienced by Aboriginal people and their communities can impact effective engagement, leading to a lack of trust, participation, and disempowerment.

The impact of Stolen Generations, where many Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families, also adds complexity to the open disclosure process.

Acknowledge that meaningful engagement requires time & adaptability

Respect and reciprocity are fundamental values for Aboriginal people. For meaningful conversations to occur, health staff must build rapport and ensure that Aboriginal individuals and communities can genuinely express their views, fully understand the discussion, and have adequate time to consider the content of the disclosure.

Key considerations for open disclosure

- ☐ Acknowledge the historical impact
- ☐ Early engagement of Aboriginal health professionals
- ☐ Meaningful engagement requires time and adaptability
- ☐ Mutually agreed location
- ☐ Careful consideration of language and terminology/trauma-informed approach, open and honest communication
- ☐ [Culturally responsive](#) health staff

¹ Refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW. Accessed 25 October 2024, [NSW Health Communicating Positively: A Guide to Appropriate Aboriginal Terminology](#).

² NSW Health Open Disclosure Policy ([PD2023_034](#)).

³ When referring to "Cultural" in the context of Aboriginal Cultural obligations, it is often capitalised to acknowledge its significance and respect for Aboriginal Cultures. This helps distinguish it as an important concept within that specific context.

Ensure that language and terminology are carefully considered

Differences in terminology can sometimes create misunderstandings. What a healthcare provider understands about engagement may not always align with the perspective of an Aboriginal family or community, particularly during times of Sorry Business or Sad News.

Be guided by verbal and nonverbal language and allow time for the family to discuss and digest the information they have received; also, invite and allow time to ask questions if needed.

Aboriginal people may take longer pauses before responding to questions, reflecting their comfort with silence as they thoughtfully consider their answers. It is important to confirm understanding, as nodding may reflect respect and engagement rather than an affirmation of understanding.

Best practices for healthcare teams

Engaging Aboriginal health professionals early in the open disclosure process can create essential links between the healthcare team and the family. These staff members are crucial in bridging cultural barriers by facilitating understanding and communication. Aboriginal health professionals can assist in explaining cultural expectations and help interpret health correspondence throughout the Open Disclosure process.

To promote clear and ongoing communication, healthcare staff should adopt a [trauma-informed](#)⁴ approach, including the use of plain, accessible language and minimising medical terminology.

Prepare for the open disclosure session with the family by clearly outlining what information will be shared, how it will be communicated, the order in which it will be discussed, and any requirements for documentation processes.

Clarify whether it is appropriate to use the name of the deceased family member. For many Aboriginal families in NSW, it can be acceptable to use the deceased's name.

Ensure the open disclosure process occurs in a mutually agreeable location. A hospital or healthcare setting may not be the most appropriate location.

Some families may feel more comfortable in a neutral, indoor or outdoor setting.

Ensure all required family members and those with strong kinship⁵ ties are invited to attend meetings. Multiple meetings with varying timeframes may be required to accommodate all necessary family members and those with strong kinship ties and to promote understanding.

It is also important to consider what else may be happening for the family, including potential financial hardships such as funeral costs, family dynamics, and the possibility that there may be difficulty finding transportation to attend meetings.

Remaining aware of potential power imbalances is essential, particularly when health staff may outnumber family members.

Families want to hear the truth. Open and honest dialogue is important for Aboriginal people, approaching discussions with sincerity and transparency will be appreciated. Allow time and space for families to share their story.

Anticipate that strong reactions may arise. These reactions often reflect the depth of strong emotions and the pain of loss. It is essential to uphold respect and professionalism throughout the disclosure process.

As a health professional, it is necessary to reflect on your background, beliefs, and values, and recognise that other cultural perspectives are valid and different, but not incorrect. Becoming [culturally responsive](#) is an ongoing process that requires continuous reflection and learning. Continuous education and expanding our understanding of diverse Aboriginal cultures is critical to building cultural capability and delivering culturally responsive care.

References

[Agency for Clinical Innovation. \(n.d.\). Culturally responsive practice.](#)

[Agency for Clinical Innovation.](#)

Flemington et al., (2022). The Daalbirrurr Gamambigu (Safe Children) Model: Embedding Cultural Safety in Child Protection Responses for Australian Aboriginal Children in Hospital Settings. *National Library of Medicine*. doi: [10.3390/ijerph19095381](#)

[New South Wales Ministry of Health. \(2019\). Communicating Positively: A Guide to Appropriate Aboriginal Terminology. New South Wales Ministry of Health.](#)

[Palliative Care Queensland. \(n.d.\). Palliative Care Queensland launches engagement and consultation toolkit: Yarning about sad news and sorry business. Palliative Care Queensland.](#)

⁴ This approach recognises the impact of trauma and emphasises safety, trust, and empowerment to avoid re-traumatisation and support healing.

⁵ Kinship in Aboriginal culture refers to a complex system of relationships that defines social roles, responsibilities, and connections within a community, extending beyond immediate family to include extended networks that guide social behaviour, caregiving, and resource sharing.