



**ST VINCENT'S
HEALTH AUSTRALIA**

UNDER THE STEWARDSHIP OF MARY AIKENHEAD MINISTRIES

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Monday, 29 March 2021

Professor Dr Marcia Langton AO
Professor Tom Calma AO
Co-Chairs
Voice Co-Design Senior Advisory Group
c/- National Indigenous Australians Agency
Charles Perkins House
16 Bowes Place
WODEN ACT 2606

Dear Professor Dr Langton and Professor Calma

re: St Vincent's Health Australia's submission in response to the Indigenous Voice Discussion Paper

As Australia's largest for-purpose provider of health and aged care services – and one of its oldest – improving the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is at the heart of St Vincent's Health Australia's (SVHA) Mission.

Since our founders, the Sisters of Charity, arrived in Australia on the final day of 1838, St Vincent's has sought to work with and for the First Nations peoples of this land and their descendants, and are grateful for their ongoing support, participation and guidance in our work.

Today, we recognise that our organisation's buildings stand on the lands and near the waterways of traditional owners who also prioritised the sustenance and flourishing of their respective communities.

In the authentic spirit of reconciliation – and in partnership with communities, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and staff, and government agencies – SVHA is committed to practical action to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including providing equity of access to high quality health and aged care services.

However, we strongly believe that practical measures designed to address disparities between Indigenous peoples and other Australians in terms of health, social, and economic outcomes will only achieve long-term success if they are matched with a meaningful change to provide a First Nations voice in our Constitution and the spiritual healing that comes from 'makarrata' or truth-telling.

SVHA strongly supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart. In November 2020, we launched our organisational response to the statement – which is attached to this submission – saying, in part:

“St Vincent’s Health Australia gratefully and unreservedly accepts the Uluru Statement from the Heart’s generous invitation to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in achieving a fair and truthful relationship and a hope-filled future based on justice and self-determination.

“We encourage all Australians – whatever their political persuasion or personal circumstance – to embrace the ambitions of the Uluru Statement and engage in a national dialogue over its terms with open-heartedness, sincerity and generosity of spirit.”

SVHA supports the co-design process to decide on what an Indigenous Voice to Parliament will look like.

We believe that, ultimately, the best way to give power to the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is by creating a Voice and enshrining it in the Constitution, as articulated by the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Constitutional enshrinement means constitutional protection of the existence and primary functions of the Voice. It does not mean constitutional entrenchment of the detail of the Voice. This detail will be determined by the Australian Parliament through legislation and can be changed to adapt to future circumstances. Constitutional enshrinement of a Voice will create a new constitutional body that informs the legislative process. We don’t believe it will increase the power of the judiciary or create a “third chamber” of Parliament as some have claimed.

Only constitutional enshrinement can give the Voice the necessary stability and certainty in its operation, free from the fear of abolition by one government to the next, while allowing for flexibility in design.

Subsequently, once a model for the Voice has been settled, we encourage the Commonwealth to hold a constitutional referendum to give the Indigenous Voice public legitimacy and authority, so as to make sure future governments and the Parliament will take its advice seriously.

Enabling legislation for the Voice must be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament.

Finally, the membership model for the National Voice recommended by the Indigenous Voice co-design process must ensure every day Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the same chance of being selected as established First Nations leadership figures.

From SVHA's beginnings, we have strived to serve the marginalised and voiceless through our health and aged care work. We see our support of the Uluru Statement – and its principal recommendation to provide a First Nations voice in our Constitution – as an extension of that same commitment.

We have wholeheartedly committed our organisation and its resources to doing all that we can to advance its cause.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a generous invitation to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in achieving a fair and truthful relationship and a hope-filled future based on justice and self-determination. Our identity as a nation will remain incomplete if we fail to benefit from the breadth of experiences and wisdom that would flow from the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our democracy.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Toby Hall', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Toby Hall
Group Chief Executive Officer
St Vincent's Health Australia