

## **Draft statement for Oz-Sage Conference 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2021 - Michael Doyle**

My Name is Michael Doyle, I am a Bardi Aboriginal man. I work in Aboriginal health research and have a background in public health. I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands upon which we are all meeting today. I am here at home in Redfern, so I pay my respects to the Gadigal people, and I pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging as well as all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people online today.

As of the 16th September there were 1,877 cases among Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people in NSW since the start of the June outbreak. 681 cases in West & Far West NSW. We're aware of three deaths. There is vaccination data for over 1600 of these cases and more than 99% were unvaccinated.

The total case numbers across Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people are now above 2000 since the start of pandemic.

Vaccines are being rolled out across the country and it is pleasing to see that the rate of vaccination is increasing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, particularly in NSW, Victoria, and the ACT, where vaccination is an urgency. However, we still have a way to go to ensure that 90% to 95% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are fully vaccinated.

Nationally, as of the 19th September, almost 43% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 12 years and older had received at least one dose and almost 25% were fully vaccinated. This shows there is still a gap in the vaccination rates that must be urgently closed.

We know there are additional efforts underway with governments working with Aboriginal community controlled health services and their peak bodies towards increasing the rate of vaccinations of First Nations people. These efforts have been prioritised within NSW, Victoria and the ACT, where these jurisdictions are currently on track to having over 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 12 years to having at least one dose of vaccine. However, further effort is needed.

For historical and contemporary reasons there is a distrust of authorities by many First Nations people, which is why it is one of the recommendations of the OzSAGE working group that Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander people should be central to the decision making at all levels and to lead and support efforts to improve vaccine uptake.

We are over 18 months into the pandemic in Australia and people are getting tired and many are, put simply 'over it'! This does not mean that we take the easy road and give up or ignore the evidence. We encourage everyone to stay strong, to get tested for COVID if they think they may have been exposed or if they have the mildest of symptoms, and to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

People with COVID can deteriorate very quickly and anyone who is feeling unwell should seek help as soon as possible. We will provide the contact numbers at the end of this statement and on the OzSAGE website so that people can have a yarn to a health professional about what they need to do if they are feeling sick.

Mask wearing continues to be a major part of the response to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19. All levels of government need to work towards ensuring masks are affordable and that there is adequate supply of masks for all Australians. This is particularly important for people who may not be able to afford the ongoing cost of masks, and also for supply to be provided to people in regions where there are limitations to access and supply of masks. COVID-19 travels with humans, so masks should be worn, in addition to other preventative measures such as vaccination and social distancing measures.

It is important that any COVID-19 mitigation measures that are developed for when school returns also includes specific advice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. This should reflect the known higher risk factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth, and identify and address the potential risks of transmission in the school environment.

No matter where we live, whether it be here in Redfern, Cairns, Broome or Djaindjin, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities are all interconnected. Before restrictions are eased and road travel is opened for non-essential purposes across jurisdictional borders and into regional and remote areas, vaccine rates in those areas need to be in the 90-95% double dose range. Until then, governments need to work with Aboriginal communities and support restrictions until communities are protected. We recommend that all people over the age of 12 years, including

people who are not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, who wish to travel to regional and remote areas, to be fully vaccinated.

Our connectedness gives us strength, and in order to leave no one behind, we must work together to ensure we are all safe.