



## **Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service**

*Launch of Strategic Plan 2015 - 2020*

by

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Chief Justice of Western Australia**

East Perth  
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## **Introduction**

I am greatly honoured to have been invited to address this gathering which marks the launch of the strategic plan which has been developed by the Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service (AADS) in order to guide the continuing development of the service over the next 5 years.

## **Acknowledgement**

Before going any further I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which was meet, the Whatjuk people who form part of the great Noongar clan of south-western Australia and pay my respects to their Elders past and present and acknowledge their continuing stewardship of these lands.

## **The over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system**

I have said many times since my appointment as Chief Justice of Western Australia that the gross over-representation of Aboriginal people within the criminal justice system of this State is by far the biggest single issue which confronts our justice system.

### **The link between substance abuse and offending**

One does not need to be a criminologist or a judge to appreciate the very strong connection between substance abuse and criminal behaviour. That connection is very strong regardless of the ethnic background or culture of the offender. In the Supreme Court of Western Australia, where I sit, we deal with the most serious offences committed in this State, being mostly homicides and armed robberies. I cannot recall ever seeing an armed robbery case that did not have a connection with illicit drugs. Alcohol and drug abuse is very strongly connected with our homicide jurisdiction, and is a significant feature of many of the cases within that jurisdiction.

Tragically, Aboriginal people are significantly over-represented in the homicide jurisdiction, very often in cases of family violence. Sustained abuse of alcohol is a very common characteristic of such cases.

### **Substance abuse has other deleterious consequences**

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the only adverse consequence of abuse of alcohol and the use of illicit drugs is criminal behaviour. Misuse and abuse of such substances has many other very adverse

effects, including a wide variety of adverse health consequences, and connections to unemployment, mental illness, homelessness and social dysfunction generally. Some of the adverse health consequences can be intergenerational, such as when the development of a foetus is affected by foetal alcohol spectrum disorder or the use of illicit drugs.

### **Why have an Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service?**

There are many good reasons for the existence of a drug and alcohol service managed by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people. In the short time available, I will mention just three of those good reasons.

### **Some common causes**

The causes of substance abuse are many and varied, and defy generalisation or simple classification. The causes of substance abuse amongst Aboriginal people are no different and are as many and varied as the circumstances of anybody affected by substance abuse.

Nevertheless, in the case of Aboriginal people there are some common causal factors which can be traced back to the days of colonisation. Of course, in a very real sense, all drug and alcohol abuse by Aboriginal people can be traced back to colonisation because before

the European settlers arrived, there were no drugs or alcohol (at least nothing like in its European form) on this continent.

In addition to bringing with them the substances which have had such an adverse effect upon the original inhabitants of this country, the European settlers did many other things which have contributed to the devastating effect which substance abuse has had upon the lives of too many Aboriginal people. Those things include dispossession and removal from traditional land, cultural dislocation, the fracture of families, the marginalisation of Aboriginal people as a minority cultural group in a country in which the dominant culture is alien to Aboriginal ways and traditions, and the multi-faceted disadvantage experienced by too many Aboriginal people across a spectrum of fields including health, education, employment and housing.

A true comprehension of these causal factors, which are present in differing degrees in many Aboriginal people suffering the adverse effects of substance abuse, is critical to the successful delivery of programmes and services designed to mitigate the effect of substance abuse. It is Aboriginal people who most truly comprehend those factors.

### **Cultural sensitivity and relevance**

The second reason why it is vitally important for there to be a drug and alcohol service presented by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people is that it facilitates the delivery of programmes, services and responses which are sensitive to and responsive to the particular needs, expectations and culture of Aboriginal people. Too many times we have seen the failure of programmes and services designed and delivered to Aboriginal by non-Aboriginal people.

### **Responsibility**

Third, in my view it is of the utmost importance that Aboriginal people take responsibility for their own people and community, and are provided with the powers and resources which they need to discharge that responsibility. The continuing gross over-representation of Aboriginal people within the criminal justice system of this country provides tangible evidence of the failure of policies, programmes and services designed and presented by non-Aboriginal people. Albert Einstein is often attributed with observing that the definition of insanity is continuing to do the same thing again and again expecting different outcomes. (Interestingly

others attribute it to either Narcotics or Alcoholics Anonymous, which seems particularly appropriate given the occasion today.) As the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system has generally worsened over the last few decades, plainly what we have been doing in order to address that issue has not worked. I have many times expressed the view that the empowerment of Aboriginal people who are provided with the resources and capacity to take responsibility for Aboriginal issues is much more likely to produce long-term gains than the various policies and programmes developed by non-Aboriginal people which have been tried and which have failed in the past.

### **The Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service**

I would like now to say a bit about the Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Service. It is significant that the Service is the only service of its kind specifically designed for Aboriginal people in the metropolitan area or in the south-west of Western Australia. It is the only Aboriginal organisation to own and control a women's refuge. Looking around these fantastic premises, there is very tangible evidence of the way in which the Service has flourished since 1988 when a group of 40 or so

Aboriginal people gathered to discuss their concern that mainstream services were not responding effectively to the particular needs of Aboriginal people in relation to drug and alcohol abuse. From humble beginnings, a staff of two workers overseen by a committee without any government funding, the Service has developed to a substantial and professional organisation which employs 40 staff, hosts students and volunteers, and which is provided with financial backing by a broad range of State and Federal funding partners.

The professionalism characteristic of the Service was officially recognised in 2013 when the AADS gained accreditation status in relation to internationally recognised standards in the area of health and community service promulgated by the Quality Improvement Council. The Service has maintained accreditation through reviews conducted since then.

In the same year, 2013, the Service delivery model for the women's refuge was acknowledged as "the way forward" for this important sector, and the refuge secured the support of a range of State and Federal agencies.

More recently, last year in July the Service was acknowledged as leaders in the delivery of Aboriginal services by the award of the Drug and Alcohol Office's *2014 Alcohol and Drug Excellence Award* in the category "Aboriginal: Outstanding Outcomes for Aboriginal People".

### **Key features**

There are a number of key features of the approach taken by the AADS. They include, significantly, not only recognising Aboriginal culture and diversity in everything they do, but adopting an holistic approach to therapy, which recognises that substance abuse by Aboriginal people can only successfully be addressed by recognising and dealing with the multi-faceted problems and issues which very often contribute to such abuse by Aboriginal people and to which I have already referred.

The Service also recognises the great desirability of collaboration with the Aboriginal community as well as other agencies, and has developed close and effective relationships with a large number of Aboriginal and mainstream organisations in the Perth metropolitan area.

The AADS also recognises that strong leadership is essential to the development of community participation and engagement, and has actively embraced strategies to facilitate the development of capacity and the identification of future leaders. Having had the opportunity to meet with a number of members of the Board of this Service, it is clear that these strategies have been very successful and I gained the firm impression that there is a very strong Board committed to a very sound governance model.

Of course, any service of this kind needs human and financial resources in order to develop and deliver good quality treatment programmes designed and presented by Aboriginal people and which support long-term change in the lives of those afflicted by substance abuse. It is to be hoped that the various agencies with which the Service has developed strong relationships continue to provide the resources required to enable this extremely valuable service to continue.

## **The Strategic Plan**

As this is, after all, the launch of the strategic plan for the next 5 years of the Service, I will close these short remarks by referring to the key principles which have been developed in that plan.

The overall vision is for the rebuilding of a healthy, safe, strong and sustainable Aboriginal community. In order to assist in the pursuit of that vision, the purpose of the AADS is:

"to provide culturally secure and holistic programmes and strategies that inform, educate and address the harmful effects of alcohol, drugs and other substances on individuals, families and communities, and strengthen the mind and body, and heal the spirit."

That purpose in turn is to be achieved by key actions and performance measures that have been developed in order to facilitate the achievement of five strategic objectives. Those objectives are:

1. Raise the public profile of the AADS.
2. Work towards securing a sustainable financial future.
3. Develop, build and expand the delivery capacity for services.

4. Work towards being recognised as a centre of excellence.
5. Strengthen and develop the organisational foundation of the service.

As you will see from the document which records the strategic plan, detailed actions and measures of performance have been developed in support of each of these important strategic objectives.

Successes of the kind which have characterised this organisation since its humble beginnings in 1988 do not occur by chance or coincidence. In a complex world in which many not-for-profit organisations are competing for increasingly limited resources, no organisation can take its continued existence for granted, and all who wish to continue in existence must demonstrate their capacity to change with the times and demonstrate their capacity to achieve measurable outcomes which justify continued funding. Those outcomes are much more likely to be achieved through the development of a framework within which specific actions are taken, consistently with the overall strategy and objectives of the organisation.

The strategic plan which we are launching today provides an admirable framework for the Aboriginal and Alcohol and Drug

Service to continue to go from strength to strength and expand the range and quality of the vital services which it delivers to descendants of the original inhabitants of this continent, with the longest unbroken culture in human history, who have been so adversely affected by the scourge of substance abuse.

I would like to conclude by congratulating all those involved in the development of the strategic plan which we are launching today, and to wish them every success in its implementation.