Summer May Finlay reported on the inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference in Alice Springs, from May 5-6, for the Croakey Conference News Service.

Croakey is a social journalism project for public health based in Australia. http://croakey.org
Previewing the inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference in Alice Springs

The inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference had a focus on strengths-based, community-driven solutions.

It also considered the importance of collective healing and secure funding arrangements, according to Summer May Finlay, a Yorta Yorta woman, Croakey contributor and PhD candidate.

Summer May Finlay writes:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are strong and proud. Yet there probably isn’t an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family who hasn’t in some way been touched by suicide or self-harm.

An individual’s social and emotional well-being is closely strongly influenced by and connected to their family and communities’ well-being as well as a strong connection to culture and country.

As well, social determinants that negatively effect people include poverty, unemployment, lack of housing, lack of access to appropriate services and ongoing racism. These make significant contribution to a sense of helplessness, hopelessness and despair for some people and can result in destructive behaviours.

This is why the Inaugural National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference brought together people, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to discuss not only the appallingly high rates of suicide seen in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics, but also how to work towards a healthy future for individuals, families and communities.

There has been much in the media recently about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and suicide. There was considerable information about the statistics, how terrible they are and the need to address the issue some how. There were many individual’s commentaries about what could be possible solutions.

The conference sought to bring together people who work in the space at a local level, experts and community to yarn about community-based solutions and the community supports which are required to develop and implement them.
No quick fixes

There cannot be one-size fits all approaches. There are no quick fixes. There are no solutions that can achieve the unachievable in a political cycle. Over 200 years of colonisation, dispossession, racism, discrimination and marginalisation have taken a toll on our communities.

No one knows these impacts better than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves; therefore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-driven solutions are required.

Keynote speakers were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including Stan Grant and Rosalie Kunoth-Mons. Other significant speakers include Professor Tom Calma, Co-Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group, Professor Pat Dudgeon, Project Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) and Richard Weston, CEO of the Healing Foundation.

The conference organisers also recognised that we could learn from the experiences of Indigenous people from other countries and included international representation in the program.

Professor Tom Calma AO, former Social Justice Commissioner, believes that the conference is significant because it prioritises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ perspectives.

“The real significance is that this the first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference is that has been organised by us, with most of the speakers and workshops delivered by our people, and the majority of the participants are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,” he said.

Focus on protective factors

Vicki O’Donnell, CEO of the Kimberley Aboriginal Health Services Ltd, is a member of the Conference Advisory Committee, and believes the significance of the conference is the strengths-based approach.

“We want to focus on interventions which promote cultural continuity, identity and language. We see these as protective factors. Part of that is building resilient, long-lasting programs,” Ms O’Donnell says.

Professor Calma agrees that a strengths-based approach is one of the key aspects of the conference, which is why there will be a focus on learning from the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“We have a number of objectives, and first and foremost is the opportunity for people to learn more about suicide prevention and to share their ideas,” he said. “This learning is not only for government or professionals but also enables communities to share their experiences and thoughts about what needs to be in place.”

Ms O’Donnell agrees that the priority is hearing from people who are working in the space or have lived experience.

She also describes the importance of collective healing, believing that we need to come together as a collective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the country to learn from and support each other.

“As Aboriginal people coming together, we can showcase the good work that’s been done,” she said. “We have common issues and gaps. The conference can also lead to collaborations across the country.”
Ms O’Donnell also expects the conference can assist non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations working in the space. She said:

“For non-Aboriginal people, I would like for them to become more aware of the underlying issues [of suicide and self harm].

The other significant things I hope they take away is that for effective solutions, they need to be co-designed with Aboriginal families and communities. Also, I want to see the non-Aboriginal organisations who receive Aboriginal funding to facilitate a space for this to occur.”

Conference themes
Themes of the conference reflect a strengths-based approach, and include:

- Community Based Solutions
- Cultural Solutions
- Social Determinants
- Cultural Practices
- Data and Statistics
- Prison and its impacts
- Stolen Generations.

To ensure attendance from all around Australia and from people who might not have had support to attend, the conference offered scholarships or bursaries. Professor Calma said:

“We want to recognise the people who are doing great work, and there are some fantastic groups at the local level who are building peoples awareness and resilience. The participants are from all over the country and... through our bursary program, we were able to make sure that a variety of people from across the country are represented.

We also wanted to make sure that the minority groups of people within our communities are equally represented such as LGBTI, those with disabilities, people very remote communities with limited English and people with lived experience. We also wanted to make sure we had people represented from the stolen generations.”

One could be forgiven for thinking that the conference will be all serious; however, if there is one thing we are good at as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is being able to laugh together, even when things aren’t so great.

Professor Calma says that laughter will also be part of the conference: “One of the thing about Aboriginal people is we can laugh in tough times. The conference is a serious matter but there will be some lighter moments.”

Conference organisers recognise that the conversations may be difficult for some people, and have ensured there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health professionals and psychologists to speak to conference attendees. Three counsellors at the conference will be from the Kimberley Aboriginal Health Services Ltd.
Social media tips

For those of you on social media – we encourage people to tweet, the hashtag is #ATSISPEP. Please keep in mind when engaging with social media that suicide and self-harm are sensitive issues.

Below are some tips on how to engage with social media and the sensitive issue of self-harm and suicide.

• Please do not record, stream or post video of people’s presentations without their express permission.
• Please don’t post tweets with people’s personal stories or photos without their permission.
• We encourage social media posts, which are strengths-based and solutions-focused in keeping with the conference tone.
• We encourage healthy conversations; however, we know trolls do exist and recommend you ignore, report or block them if they engage in negative debate.

Of course, there will be some take-home messages for governments too.

Ms O’Donnell said:

“I want the government to sit up and pay attention to the good work that’s happening in communities. There are some great programs but the funding isn’t sustainable. Every year we have to fight for funds. We shouldn’t have to do that. We don’t want to be in the same situation three years later.”

On Twitter follow: @OnTopicAus & #ATSISPEP

• For more information on the conference please visit the website: http://www.atsispep.sis.uwa.edu.au/natsispc-2016
• Also read this ABC story about a group travelling to the conference from Leonora.
“Talking solutions”: an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Summer May Finlay writes:

I am writing this from Alice Springs where an historic event is underway – the inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention conference (follow #ATSISPEP on Twitter).

Despite the challenging and traumatic topic, the mood is hopeful, perhaps because this conference is setting all sorts of “firsts”.

This is the first conference I have attended where our voices have been preferenced in this way.

The program has been designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The keynotes are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The presenters are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is hard to miss at this conference. People are talking solutions, not just statistics.

According to Richard Weston, the CEO of the Healing Foundation: “It’s important that the conference actually shows what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are capable of.”

A common theme of the conference has been “nothing about us without us” – as underscored by Dameyon Bonson during his presentation this morning (see more in the tweets below).
Culture is the key to keeping us healthy, and as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we are the Cultural knowledge holders. The solutions need to be driven by us.

Today we heard some of the recommendations from the concurrent sessions. At the end of the conference, all the recommendations will be collected and presented to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project National Advisory Committee.

Weston doesn’t want to pre-empt the recommendations, but hopes that the government will listen to them.

“We very much have a top-down approach at the moment to Aboriginal Affairs,” he said.

He expects the recommendations will challenge governments with “the idea that Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people have solutions that are embedded in our Cultures, embedded in our ancient knowledge.”

“Solutions will have to privilege that knowledge,” he said.

One of the key themes to emerge from the conference today is the impact of racism and discrimination on our peoples’ social and emotional wellbeing.

Professor Helen Milroy, a Commissioner of The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and a descendant of the Palyku people of the Pilbara region, understands these impacts all too well. She has lived them and seen them through her work as a Commissioner.

She told the conference: “Racism isolates. It creates an ’other’. Racism is incredibly challenging. It is hard to shake. It’s a difficult thing to tackle if we don’t see it. We need to make it visible. It’s everyone’s responsibility to say no to racism. It shouldn’t rest on the shoulders of our children.”

The inspirational, passionate and dedicated Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, an Amatjere and Arrernte woman and the current NAIDOC female Person of the Year, was a keynote speaker who had a powerful impact (see tweets below).

She urged the conference:

"I want to know before we are done tomorrow where we are heading. Let’s find a line of action to turn a new page.

Our voices carry power. Our voices carry knowledge. Our voices carry experience. We are the answer to the issues we face.”

Meanwhile, the World Indigenous Suicide Conference will be held in New Zealand from 1 – 3 June.
From the Twittersphere

Below is a collaborative Twitter essay that shows how the conference has unfolded since the opening on Wednesday night.

Ngaree Ah Kit @ngareeahkl · 2h
Lovely smoking ceremony at the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Conference #ATSISPEP

Dameyon Bonson @DameyonBonson · 20h
Prof’s Tom Calma and Pat Dudgeon opening up #ATSISPEP conference. History is being made. It’s emotional. It’s time.
You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.

"Talking solutions": an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP

"Culture is at the centre" of our Social & Emotional Wellbeing says Prof Tom Calma in the opening of Suicide Prevention Conference #ATSISPEP

Prof Tom Calma presenting at the #ATSISPEP conference hopes we can build the resilience of our youth #youth #Culture

The amazing Rosalie Kunoth-Monks opening the Suicide Prevention conference in AliceSprings

"Talking solutions": an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP
The conference began with presentations from:

- **Professor Tom Calma AO**, Co-Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group

- **Professor Pat Dudgeon**, Project Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP)

- **Richard Weston**, CEO, Healing Foundation
"Talking solutions": an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP

You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference here.

#ATSISPEP

Professor Pat Dudgeon’s update on ATSISPEP at National Suicide Prevention Conference @AustPsych

Purpose of ATSISPEP

- The development of an evidence base for what works in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention;
- The development of a culturally appropriate evaluation framework, including a national interactive map of places experiencing high rates of suicide and the available services;
- Identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention needs; and
- Identify system-level change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention; and
- Host a National Suicide Prevention Conference.

R Weston: Gov'ts must invest in community led strategies to prevent crises in communities-scale up healing

#ATSISPEP
Keynote speech by Rosalie Kunoth-Monks

Rosalie Kunoth Monks keynoting at #ATSISPEP

I am on my country, speaking my language - our culture
Aunty Rosalie Kunoth-Monks
A powerful woman!!! #ATSISPEP
“Talking solutions”: an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP

Croakey
"Conference News Service"
You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference here.

"Talking solutions": an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP

Other presentations

Yvonne Luxford @YSLL 2h
Entire massive #ATSISPEP conference held spellbound by wonderful Rosalie Kunoth-Monks
Summer May Finlay

Yvonne Luxford @YSLL 25m
Beautiful message stick 'Message of Hope' brought from Beagle Bay Nyul Nyul peoples to #ATSISPEP conference
"Talking solutions": an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP
You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference here.

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“Talking solutions”: an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP

Professional support was on hand

#ATSISPEP conference participants are well supported by this fabulous bunch of counsellors
Selfies and snaps

“You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.
You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference here.

"Talking solutions": an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP
“Talking solutions”: an historic conference on preventing suicides in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

#ATSISPEP
Watch and listen: Interviews from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention conference

At the inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention conference in Alice Springs, Summer May Finlay conducted a number of Periscope interviews with conference participants and speakers. Please watch them below.

The post also includes her video-reflections on day one and at the conclusion of the conference.

Jay Delaney

JD, a 40-year-old Indigenous trans man, says the conference has been hugely important, showing the amazing work being done in communities. It has been vital for exchanging ideas and creating action, he says. Understanding your identity and having a sense of belonging and connection are vital for helping to keep people alive, he says. He also urges people to be gentle and kind to each other, to be supportive and open-minded and “to recognise that small things can effect big changes”. He adds: “If people reach out to you, please don’t turn your back.” Follow him on Twitter at @JayDelaneyau. Read more here.
Joe Williams

Joe, a Wiradjuri man from Wagga Wagga in NSW, describes his history of bipolar disorder, his recovery plan (including healthy eating, exercise and lifestyle), and how he uses his sporting profile to share his story widely with the community as part of healing work with his charity, The Enemy Within. He also describes the impact of colonial oppression, discrimination and racism upon mental health and wellbeing. Read more about his work here, and follow on Twitter: @joewilliams_tew

Tauto Sansbury

Tauto Sansbury, a Narungga Elder from South Australia’s Yorke Peninsula, is attending the conference to find some solutions to take back to SA, “to start a different conversation”. He highlights the harmful impacts of incarceration, loss of country, and loss of self-determination, and also describes the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. “I think government should hear what the people are saying,” he says.

Ken Riddiford

Ken Riddiford, CEO of the Kimberley Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation, describes the impacts of transgenerational trauma in Stolen Generations people. This conference is important because of its focus on preventative strategies for youth suicides, he says. He describes the important role his own grandmother played in his own development as a youth, in keeping him away from harms such as drugs and alcohol.

Richard Weston, CEO of the Healing Foundation

Richard Weston, a descendant of the Meriam people of the Torres Strait, says the conference is “super important”, and stresses the importance of urgently addressing the suicide crisis facing some communities. He says: “We know from our work that much of the distress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today is generated by the trauma of Stolen Generations policies and colo-
nisation. Our work is about working with communities to address trauma through cultural healing.” Locally designed and led healing and prevention strategies are important for breaking the cycle of crisis and to prevent suicides, he says. He also describes the intellectual power, wisdom and cultural strength of those contributing to the conference organisation and presentations. He distinguishes between “Government” and “bureaucracy”, and says Government may be challenged by the notion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have solutions embedded in their knowledge and culture. “They need to change the system, to tackle the processes of policy making and the processes of engagement...If we don’t have that, then we won’t see successful outcomes,” he says. “If Government doesn’t get the message, then we will get more of the same – half baked ideas…”

**John Paterson**

John Paterson, chief executive of the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT), says the conference is about hearing from other service providers and organisations facing similar challenges in their own communities to see what may be working, and to enable collaboration among those trying to address and prevent suicides. He hopes that conference participants can develop an agreed approach forward, to steer away from duplication of services, to identify any gaps, and to continue supporting useful programs and services while learning from them. He urges anyone contemplating self-harm to pick up the phone, ring a friend or family member or someone they trust to seek support. “Don’t think that you are alone,” he says. Aboriginal communities are about sharing and caring and looking after everyone in the community, he says.

**Summer May Finlay**

Reflecting on the first day of the conference, Summer May Finlay says solutions must be driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Governments need to understand that if they want to make a difference, she says. Coming to this conference shows how strong we are as peoples. “I really wish people could see us as I see us,” she says. “We’re strong, passionate, driven people that really are a hell of a lot more than the crap that we have to put up with. These conferences and hopefully the interviews that I’ve done demonstrate to people that we are knowledgeable, we are able to actually work on our own solutions, and we just need to be given the time, the money and the space to do that.”
Vanessa Lee

Vanessa Lee says the conference has been empowering, in bringing together people from the same historical background with shared experiences of colonisation, including of oppression, inequality, and discrimination. She presented at the conference on “Domestic Violence, Suicide and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQI”, and talks about the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention to be inclusive of sexually and gender diverse people. “Let’s stop the suicides, let’s stop the domestic violence,” she says.

Indi Clarke

Indi Clarke, 23, is a Muthi Muthi and Lardil man, currently employed with Mallee District Aboriginal Services in Mildura in north-west Victoria, as a Youth and Community Engagement Facilitator. He loves his role, working with his community and giving back. His work includes mentoring, work experience, cultural awareness and emerging leaders programs. He describes the negative stereotypes around Aboriginality, which should instead be seen as an “amazing thing”. He promotes the positives to youth and the community. He is part of the National Empowerment Project. “Mental health is something that touches us all,” he says. He looks to family and friends when feeling overwhelmed himself. “Some people don’t have that, and we’ve got to provide those opportunities for those guys,” he said. He was part of the panel on racism, and would like to see a recommendation for governments to address racism, including in their own backyard, for example through doing Acknowledgement of Country in Parliaments.

Scott Avery

Scott Avery, the Policy and Research Director at the First Peoples Disability Network (Australia), talks about the importance of capturing the narratives and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with disability. Disability is largely invisible in many social policy areas, including in suicide prevention. The conference has shown the complexity of issues involved in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention, and that governments aren’t well organised to respond to this issue. On Twitter, follow @ScottTheHolWrd.
For help or more information

For people who may be experiencing sadness or trauma, please visit these links to services and support:

- If you are depressed or contemplating suicide, help is available at Lifeline on 131 114 or online. Alternatively you can call the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.
- For young people 5-25 years, call kids help line 1800 55 1800
- For resources on social and emotional wellbeing and mental health services in Aboriginal Australia, see here.

Summer May Finlay

At the end of the conference, Summer May Finlay reflects on a “long couple of days” and her feelings of vulnerability during some of the heart-breaking discussions. The take-home message from the conference is the power of the collective to make a difference, she says. “I just wish… that Government would see us for our strength, and sit up and pay attention.” Suicide and self-harm are a symptom of larger issues, she says, and we need to not be working in silos but need to work across sectors such as health, justice and education. She says: “I’ve spent the last couple of days with some amazing people who have so much strength, despite having gone through so much. If we could just harness that strength and work with Government, we could do so much more than we are now.”
The power and the passion: hearing from a landmark conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention

The inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention conference provided delegates with a safe space to come together and to share experiences, emotions and insights.

While the formal conference recommendations are yet to come, some of the key themes to emerge were the centrality of connection to Culture and country, the need for holistic approaches to address the wider social determinants of health, and the importance of healing and strengths-based approaches in working with communities.

Another recurring theme was the need for governments to be more accountable in how they work with communities.

Summer May Finlay writes:

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we often have to be strong for our families and communities.

Like me, most of our people put on their protective armour when they step out into the world. That armour only comes off in a few very safe places.

This conference was one of those safe places. It allowed us a space to be vulnerable. It allowed us to share a full range of emotions – hope, sorrow, anger, and determination.
At times I felt very vulnerable. I felt the pain that most of us keep buried, and I decided that it was OK to feel the pain. It is that feeling that I know drives most of us.

When dealing with the topic of suicide, the emotions we feel are a strength. We needed to talk about our experiences to be able to understand what is required to heal and reduce the devastating suicide rates.

In a powerful keynote oration, Stan Grant, a Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi man, journalist and author, spoke of the enduring impact of “the memories and wounds” felt by many:

“The memories of loss and sadness, the memories of grief... this is our inheritance.

These memories are not just carried within us; these memories seep deep into our land.

This is a sad country in so many ways for us... We love and find laughter in each other but we check ourselves because we know too well that grief waits for us.”

We knew through these words he too has experienced the pain. Pain he generously shared with us.

Everyone who was at the conference has in some way been touched by suicide. Despite the pain they feel, they were able to find the strength to come together to work together.

Focus on solutions

Working together does not mean that there weren’t differences of opinions. There were. But the conference was about us coming together to find solutions, despite our differences.

The presentations were varied. There were sessions on the link between justice and suicide, local solutions, a holistic preventative approach, what we don’t know, and the importance of culture.
A number of key themes were repeated by different speakers across the two days. These included the need for better crisis management, a holistic approach to suicide prevention and that connection to Culture holds the key to reducing the toll of suicides.

Professor Pat Dudgeon, a Bardi woman, a research fellow and psychologist known for her leadership in Indigenous higher education and mental health, was the Chair of the Conference Advisory Committee. She has seen and felt the impacts of suicide, and decided to work in the space of suicide prevention and self-harm because of her experiences.

After a suicide of a close family member, she realised the lack of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. “There were no services to support my family,” she said. “There were no services, no counsellors, no literature. It’s like they didn’t exist or something.”

For Professor Dudgeon, it was the family who was the support: “We were lucky that my family was quite strong… we were lucky in that regard”.

Professor Dudgeon is working for Culturally appropriate resources and services for our peoples. She believes “firstly, Indigenous suicide is different. If you are going to do any kind of service or intervention, it needs to be culturally appropriate and needs to have community engagement.”

Kanat Wano of the Meriam Nation says there is a difference between “surviving and thriving”, and he wants to see Culturally appropriate programs like his all over the country.

Evidence gaps

In some areas, such as the needs of gender diverse people and for people with disabilities, we need more information, and more needs to be done (as outlined by Dameyon Bonson in relation to LGBTQI people at The Guardian).

Vanessa Lee, a Wik and Meriam woman, says we need listen to the anecdotal evidence but we also need data: “We need that statistical information; we need that identification.”

She hopes that this will lead to better policy. She suggests we need a “strategy to bring this all together into one space… which is inclusive of the sexuality and gender diverse people”. (See a video interview with Vanessa Lee).

Scott Avery, a Worimi man who works at the First Peoples Disability Network, also acknowledges the limitations in our evidence base, which has an impact on people with disability.

“Aboriginal people with disability are often the most marginalised people in our country,” he said. “They often experience disadvantage and discrimination in layers.”

He wants the wisdom and lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability to be captured, as at present it is an invisible space. (See a video interview with Scott Avery).
Holistic approaches needed

To explain the meaning of suicides in communities, Professor Dudgeon draws on an analogy used by Professor Michael Chandler, who has worked with First Nation Peoples in Canada to understand youth suicide and self harm – that “suicide is like the miner’s canary”.

She said:

“Reform is needed, it’s not just about suicide where it’s needed. Suicide is that last desperate act that people do, it’s a sign.

When the birds die, it means the air around is not good. So high rates of suicide are indicating that things are not good in a group.

We need to do other kinds of changes. It can’t be looked at in isolation to the other social determinants and mental health.”

The social determinants approach to suicide prevention was also raised by Professor Tom Calma AO, a former Social Justice Commissioner, who said we need to “break down the silos” within government.

His comment reinforces the need for us to see the whole person, community and family in their totality to truly be able to prevent suicides.

Mervyn Eades, who spoke of his experiences in and out of the justice system, understands the need for holistic approaches.

He realised how hard it was for many people like him to get a job, which is why he started a training and employment agency, Ngalla Maya, for other people who have been in jail.

He wants to see more opportunities on release because “the reality comes in when you walk out in the community and the options aren’t there. The recidivism and reoffending comes from the lack of options.” (Read more in this ABC story.)

Vicki O’Donnell, the CEO of the Kimberley Aboriginal Health Services Ltd, said we need to develop a better understanding of local responses in regards to suicide.

“We don’t want to be concentrating on the numbers of suicides, but the social determinants and all the reasons people suicide, and how we can actually run programs to stop that happening,” she said.

Keynote speaker Rosalie Kunoth-Monks stands proud on her land, that of the Arrernte people. She has seen too many deaths from suicide, and believes “it is Culture, language and ceremony which keeps us healthy, but more importantly it’s our land which is the most important”.

The “joy of life is to be found in the black Culture of this country,” she said.
Stan Grant also talked of Culture and the role it played in the health of our Peoples, but said that we can also walk in both worlds:

“We can have a foot in our traditions and a foot in the market. That we can speak our languages and we can know our kin and we attend the best universities and I can be a Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi man in New York or Jerusalem or Bagdad or Beijing as surely as I can be in Alice Springs or my home town of Griffiths.”

There was talk of the issues and of solutions. There was also a call for government to listen to communities and fund programs designed by them to address their individual needs.

There was also a recognition that the issues we face cannot be solved solely by governments. Rather, communities need to step up as Peoples, and make changes for future generations.

Professor Dudgeon wants to see the $17.8 million that was set aside by the Federal Government for suicide prevention allocated once the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project report is completed.

It’s not just the amount of money which is important but also the implementation. She said: “I think that a lot of funding is put in for Indigenous issues but they aren’t successful because they don’t engage with community.”

It is the people in each community who know what’s happening. Their input into any program or support is the only way to make a real difference to preventing suicides.

Richard Weston, a Meriam man and CEO of the Healing Foundation, said: “We need broader strategies around preventing crises, and to be supporting communities to access healing and other services before they get to crisis.”

This “is going to take a different way of thinking,” he said.

The conference was not just about sharing and networking. It was also about making recommendations, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments.

The Conference Advisory Committee will list all the conference recommendations in a report, which will be available on the website.
From the Twittersphere

Stan Grant's keynote presentation generated lively interest from Twitter and the wider media.

Professor Ted Wilkes and Professor Dennis Gray presented on the reduction of harmful use of alcohol and other drugs.

You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference here.

The power and the passion: hearing from a landmark conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention

#ATSISPEP
The power and the passion: hearing from a landmark conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention

Other presentations and sessions covered diverse topics.
You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.

The power and the passion: hearing from a landmark conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention

#ATSISPEP
The power and the passion: hearing from a landmark conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention

#ATSISPEP
The impact of over-incarceration was highlighted.

Summer May Finlay @IndigenousX 8h
Mervyn was in out of jail. He had enough & started an employment business for ppl coming out. #Justice #ATSISPEP

Summer May Finlay @IndigenousX 8h
"For one little black woman" Aunty Heather Agius to go into jails legislation needed to passed in S.A. #ATSISPEP
Summer May Finlay presented on the #JustJustice project (watch it here).

There was music and dance.
You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.

The power and the passion: hearing from a landmark conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention

#ATSISPEP
The power and the passion: hearing from a landmark conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention

You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference here.

Selfies and social shots

The commissioners @NogdenLucy & @jckiecrow24 ready to listen to Stan Grant at #ATSISPEP

Were in Alice Springs this week at the #ATSISPEP Conference. Thanks to @ErnieDingo1 for the great interviews

NZ Delegation thanking and acknowledging ARANTA country hosts & conference organisers #ATSISPEP

Croakey “Conference News Service”
Wrapping up

You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference here.

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#ATSISPEP
Analytics

Twitter analytics show there were 997 participants at #ATSISPEP on Twitter and almost 22 million Twitter impressions (30 March - 12 May).

The #ATSISPEP Influencers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 10 by Mentions</th>
<th>Top 10 by Tweets</th>
<th>Top 10 by Impressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@indigenousx 666</td>
<td>@croakeyblog 381</td>
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<tr>
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<td>@ontopicus 232</td>
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<td>@berringbow 170</td>
<td>@indigenousphaus 76</td>
<td>@indigenousphaus 76</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The Numbers

- 21,893,773 Impressions
- 4,743 Tweets
- 997 Participants
- 16 Avg Tweets/ Hour
- 5 Avg Tweets/ Participant

#ATSISPEP Participants

Read the Twitter transcript [here](#).
For help or more information

For people who may be experiencing sadness or trauma, please visit these links to services and support:

- If you are depressed or contemplating suicide, help is available at Lifeline on 131 114 or online. Alternatively you can call the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.
- For young people 5-25 years, call kids help line 1800 55 1800
- For resources on social and emotional wellbeing and mental health services in Aboriginal Australia, see here.

Declarations and acknowledgements

Summer May Finlay reported on the event for the Croakey Conference News Service. Her expenses for attending the conference were covered with a bursary and she also presented on Croakey’s #JustJustice project. We also acknowledge and thank Frank Meany of OneVision for his donation to cover Croakey’s editorial production and design costs associated with conference coverage.

Croakey Conference News Service

- Reporting by Summer May Finlay
- Editing by Melissa Sweet
- Layout and design by Mitchell Ward