

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise approximately 3% of the total Australian population, with a lower proportion living in major cities than non-Indigenous Australians (37.4 versus 72.7%) and higher proportions living in outer regional (20 versus 8%), remote (6.7 versus 1%) and very remote areas (11.9 versus 0.5%). At the time of colonisation, over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were spoken across Australia. Only around 120 of those languages are still spoken today, with many at risk as Elders die. Today, 38% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults speak an Australian Indigenous language, with higher rates in remote areas than in non-remote areas (76% compared with 28%). Where English is a second or subsequent language, this can have a significant impact on the style of communication used, particularly when raising organ and tissue donation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have ancient and complex cultures based on oral and pictorial history. There are many differences in the rituals carried out near the end of life. Previous work done in the Northern Territory identified no cultural barriers that preclude organ donation being raised. Belief in the importance of being buried whole and in the transference of the spirit of the donor with their donated organ to the recipient may deter some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families from giving consent for organ and tissue donation. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander donors across Australia is increasing as a result of improved community awareness and the donation conversation being conducted in a culturally appropriate manner by expert trained health professionals.

Culturally appropriate educational resources using pictures and language have been developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to aid these discussions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians may be distrustful of people in authority (including hospital clinicians) due to personal experiences and historically disrespectful treatment of their families and cultural groups. Therefore, it is particularly important for health professionals to practise cultural humility — humbly acknowledging themselves as learners in understanding the experiences and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Aboriginal Health Workers (AHWs) and Indigenous Liaison Officers (ILOs) can help to broker a trusting relationship between the family and intensive care clinicians. In some instances, kinship relationships or other factors make it inappropriate for the AHW or ILO to be involved in conversations with a particular family, especially around end-of-life issues. Therefore, health professionals should check with both the AHW or ILO and the family that they are willing to participate in discussions together before embarking on family meetings.

Table 3.4 demonstrates the breadth of considerations in respecting cultural beliefs among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Not all considerations will be relevant to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

**Table 3.4: Selected considerations in caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families**

Recognise the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and language groups.
Where possible and with the family's consent, work with an Indigenous Liaison Officer or Aboriginal Health Worker and, if appropriate, invite them to participate in family meetings.
In some communities, death may be a taboo topic- the words 'death' and 'dying' may cause offence. Terms such as 'finishing up' or 'passing' may be more appropriate.
Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have a strong preference to die on their homeland- to 'finish up on country'- and they may prioritise this ahead of medical treatment.
There is commonly a large gathering of family and community around the dying person to help them on their final journey. Families may need a larger room to congregate.
It is culturally important for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that the name of the deceased person not be used.
Customary death rituals may include the smoking ceremony, which helps send the spirit into the next world.