Making the coronial system safer for our communities

The Lived Experience Workshop Group from the Coronial Responses project reunited on Noongar Country. Back row, left to right: Eliza Kitchener, Aunty Donna Smith, Tanja Hirvonen, Aunty Annette Manado. Front row: Annabell Tabuai, Aunty Vicki McKenna, Aunty Kathleen Tabuai.

Prof Pat Dudgeon

When people pass away suddenly or unexpectedly, their death is referred to the coroner in their State or Territory to determine the cause and – sometimes – how it could have been prevented.

It is a tragic situation that few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are untouched by suicide. Almost all of us have experienced the loss of loved ones, family members, extended family members, friends and members of our communities who have taken their own lives; the suicide rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults is double that of other Australians.

Because of this high suicide rate – as well as higher rates of accidental and other sudden deaths – the passings of Indigenous people are much more likely to be investigated by coroners compared to other Australians, so it is especially important that coronial processes meet our needs.

The coroner is part of the justice system, and they do their work through a court. They are responsible for liaising with the police, health systems and others, including family and friends, who can shed light on what was happening for the person at the time, to reach a conclusion. Sometimes there is an inquest (a court hearing about the passing) but usually, the coroner just looks at the documents and communicates with the family through official letters.

All of this can be highly traumatising for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a time of deep grief and vulnerability. People might feel intimidated by a setting that resembles a criminal court. The language and concepts used may be unfamiliar. Direct discussion of the person who has passed, particularly the manner of the passing, can conflict with cultural ways and Sorry Business, and families can feel their loved one is disregarded and not valued.

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention conducted research into Indigenous families' experiences of coroners' courts and how the coronial system could become safer and more supportive.

We were privileged to convene a workshop of Aboriginal and Torres Strait family members who had been bereaved by suicide – some recently, some long ago. In partnership with the Black Dog Institute's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Lived Experience Centre we supported the group to share their experiences of the coronial system, and the group formed a strong bond. It was the first time Indigenous people's perspectives on the coronial system had ever been systematically collected.

The group told us their grief was compounded by their experiences with the coroners' courts. They said they needed support through the coronial process – which can take more than a year – from Indigenous staff with the knowledge and cultural skills to keep them safe. They wanted information brochures and reports they could understand, not jargon. And they asked for the coroners to recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship structures, to ensure they were talking with the right family members. Most of all, they wanted their loss to be used to prevent further suicides, through research and information sharing.

These ideas were presented to governments, and we are pleased that there has been some progress. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander liaison staff are now working in coroners' courts in most States and Territories, and we have heard that some appointments resulted directly from our study.

The excellent Coroners Toolkits, developed by Thirrili, build on our work to give clear guidance and resources about the coronial system in each State and Territory and show people how they can access support.

It is essential that coronial systems continue this progress to become culturally responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, so they can offer support and compassionate advice at a time of loss, instead of causing further distress.

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This is part a series of *Koori Mail* columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the CBPATSISP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for Indigenous people and communities.

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