

Racism in healthcare linked to poor mental health

Experiencing racism in health settings may have a stronger negative influence on the mental health of Aboriginal Australians than experiencing racism anywhere else, a survey led by the University of Melbourne has found.

The VicHealth-funded survey, published in the latest edition of the *Medical Journal of Australia*, could go some way to explaining the reduced quality of healthcare often reported by Indigenous communities.

Led by Associate Professor Margaret Kelaher and researcher Angeline Ferdinand in collaboration with Professor Yin Paradies from Deakin University, the survey examined experiences of racism in health settings (alongside other areas including workplaces, education and sport and their impact on mental health among Aboriginal Australians.

Of the 755 survey participants, 97 per cent experienced at least one racist incident in the previous 12 months in a range of settings. Nearly one-third of participants experienced racism in hospitals and healthcare specifically, said Professor Kelaher.

“The most frequent experience of racism in this setting included being a target of racist names, jokes or teasing, or hearing comments that relied on stereotypes of Aboriginal Australians. Ten per cent of respondents indicated that they had been told that they ‘didn’t belong in Australia’, that they should ‘go home’ or ‘get out’.

“People who experienced racism in health settings were more likely to experience very high psychological distress, compared with respondents who reported no experiences of racism,” Professor Kelaher said.

Racism in health settings may contribute to poorer health through increasing patient stress as well as through reduced quality of health care and limited access to health services and other resources that protect and promote health.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said the research established a link between racist incidents and poor mental health for Indigenous people, and had strong implications for how we deal with racism in the future.

“VicHealth has undertaken considerable research over the past decade which has built the case for preventing, and responding to, race-based discrimination. This report provides evidence that racism in health care, like many other parts of the community, is detrimental to health and reveals an urgent need to address this issue in Victoria,” Ms Rechter said.

Associate Professor Kelaher believes steps towards closing the gap in Indigenous health and reducing racial bias are necessary.

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