



Victorian Transcultural  
MENTAL HEALTH

23<sup>rd</sup> January 2019

Mental Health Royal Commission Establishment

Department of Premier and Cabinet

1 Treasury Place

Melbourne Vic 3002

To whom it may Concern

**Royal Commission into Mental Health: Terms of Reference**

Victorian Transcultural Mental Health welcomes the establishment of the Royal Commission into Mental Health.

We recognise the Royal Commission as an opportunity to hear from and make visible, the lives and experiences of Victorians from diverse communities.

We welcome the invitation to contribute to Royal Commission into mental health and advocate that the Terms of Reference include a focus on cultural safety and responding to diversity.

**About Victorian Transcultural Mental Health**

Victorian Transcultural Mental Health (VTMH) was formed over 25 years ago as the Victorian Transcultural Psychiatry Unit (VTPU). It has evolved from a small clinical service to become a state-wide provider of organisational development, community engagement, workforce development and research; funded by the Mental Health, Drugs and Regions Division of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and administered by St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne.

The unit works with organisations and agencies to strengthen their capacity to address inequity in mental health service provision, with the overarching goal of improving the mental health, social health and emotional wellbeing of culturally diverse individuals, families and communities.

More specifically, VTMH aims to:

- Assist the development and implementation of policies related to improving culturally responsive mental health service systems.
- Promote greater understanding of cultural diversity in health and social service systems and advocate for the adoption of strategies that address inequity in service delivery.
- Facilitate the delivery of culturally responsive mental health services by engaging service providers and other agencies as partners.
- Develop a culturally responsive mental health workforce through education, providing resources and responding to enquiries.
- Assist consumers from culturally diverse backgrounds, and their families and carers, to share their experiences and participate in policy and service reform debates.
- Engage culturally diverse communities in addressing mental health, social and emotional wellbeing.
- Share experience and knowledge and contribute to research and evaluation.

VTMH's mission is broad and its reach extends beyond the mental health sector to include primary health, social support, ethno-cultural and multicultural agencies, schools and universities, local councils, and institutions that comprise the justice system. Over the years, VTMH has structured its work program so that it aligns with current policy priorities and reflects current international trends in transcultural health research and literature. These include adopting population health principles, conceptualising cultural responsiveness at practitioner, organisational, community and systemic levels, and using theoretical perspectives such as social models of health and post-colonial critiques to understand health inequalities and the operations of power in mental health settings.<sup>1</sup>

Our ongoing work with government, organisations and communities continues to highlight the following themes:

**1. Access, equity and inclusion**

People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are less represented in mental health services across the continuum from acute services to community care. For those people who do access mental health services, this contact is more frequently involuntary and further along in the illness experience, with higher rates of involuntary admissions and extended periods of time in acute units.

There are problems with how services have been designed and a lack of service options. As a result, significant proportions of vulnerable populations do not have access to appropriate, acceptable psychosocial support services

**2. Responding to diversity through the lens of intersectionality**

Culturally responsive practice recognises a dynamic and ongoing process of recognising and responding to diversity rather than previous concepts of cultural competency. As the Victorian population continues to grow, so does our diversity, as people express multiple forms of identity and belonging.<sup>2</sup> An intersectional approach recognises that identities are interconnected and some may hold more power than others, impacting on peoples visibility and access to equitable and inclusive services.

**3. Identity, discrimination and recovery**

Identity is complex. People can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously. Structural inequity or experiences of disadvantage interact with contextual factors and social dynamics which can increase the experience of marginalisation, inequity, and health disparity. Research and the voices of lived experience continue to highlight the mental health impacts of structural discrimination inclusive of but not limited to, ethnicity, race, culture or sexual orientation.

**4. Collaboration with families and communities including carers**

In addition to the challenges commonly faced by carers regardless of cultural background, families and communities from culturally and linguistically diverse communities continue to express a lack of accessible information related to their experience, difficulty in understanding information that is provided by mental health services, a lack of understanding about mental illness and services, social isolation and experiences of shame and stigma, and complexity in negotiating cultural attitudes, values and beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

**5. Cultural responsiveness and recovery**

Recovery occurs within relationships and is contextualised by culture, language, oppression and privilege, history and the social determinants of health.<sup>4,5</sup> Recovery oriented practice is culturally responsive in approach. Cultural responsiveness and practices promoting cultural safety are foundational rather than 'add on' in recovery oriented services.

Recovery oriented practices should also be culturally responsive and culturally safe for all individuals regardless of their cultural background or life experiences. Some examples of what this means are: undertaking comprehensive assessments, using language services effectively, exploring non-medical and non-psychological explanations for distress. These principles should not be regarded as optional considerations, but essential to every encounter.

## 6. Lived Experience and workforce development <sup>6, 7, 8, 9</sup>

Cultural responsiveness is an active process which includes:

- Recognising and responding to language barriers including access to and working effectively with interpreters
- Access to and routine use of translated materials, particularly regarding service navigation, legal rights, service responsibilities and complaints processes
- Access to written information in easy to read English or in community languages and/or explained via an interpreter
- Partnering with cultural brokers, refugee settlement workers, bilingual community workers, and faith leaders to support a person's recovery plans
- Recognising and responding to concepts of mental health, mental illness and recovery within diverse communities by routinely integrating culturally responsive practice into mental health assessment, formulation and support, including routine use of cultural assessments and formulations
- An understanding of explanatory models and their impact on help seeking behaviours and continuity of care
- Cultural assessment and cultural formulation as routine practice
- Recognising and responding to the impact of traumatic experiences on the mental health and wellbeing of refugee and asylum seeker communities

## 7. Review of the Policy Context

VTMH's work is informed by national and state mental health standards and practice guidelines and laws and other frameworks related to human rights, access and equity, diversity and language services and multiculturalism. The current Cultural responsiveness framework for Victorian Health Services which determines a minimum level of activity in four broad domains of quality and safety was released in 2009.

### Recommendation

That the Victorian Government include in the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference a focus on:

- Recognising and responding to diversity
- Recognising the impact of discrimination on mental health and wellbeing
- Recognising cultural safety and cultural responsiveness as a human right for all Victorians
- Recognising the role of families and communities in mental health recovery and care

### Further assistance

Victorian Transcultural Mental Health is available to support and assist the work of the Royal Commission into Mental Health, particularly in relation to meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and communities across Victoria.

Please contact Adriana Mendoza, Manager, Victorian Transcultural Mental Health on 9231 3302 or at [adriana.mendoza@svha.org.au](mailto:adriana.mendoza@svha.org.au) if the unit can be of assistance.

Yours sincerely



Adriana Mendoza  
Manager

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<sup>1</sup>Victorian Transcultural Mental Health (2016), Responding to Diversity: An Evaluation of VTMH Programs and Services, 2013 – 2015. Fitzroy, Victoria: VTMH.

<sup>2</sup>The Victorian Government (2018) Family Violence Reform: Diversity and Intersectionality Framework Melbourne: Victorian Government

<sup>3</sup>Victorian Transcultural Mental Health. (2014) Our Voices: Stories of carers from refugee and migrant backgrounds [Video]. Fitzroy, Victoria: Victorian Transcultural Mental Health.

<sup>4</sup>Department of Health (2011) Framework for Recovery-Oriented Practice. Melbourne: Victorian Government

<sup>5</sup>Australian Government (2013) National Framework for Recovery-Oriented Mental Health Services: Guide for Practitioners and Providers. Canberra: Australian Government.

<sup>6</sup>Department of Health (2009) Cultural Responsiveness Framework: Guidelines for Victorian Health Services. Melbourne: Victorian Government.

<sup>7</sup>Department of Health (2013) Victoria's priorities for mental health reform 2013–15. Melbourne: Victorian Government. Mental Health Act. 2014. (Vic.) (Austl.)

<sup>8</sup>Department of Human Services (2014) Language Services Policy. Melbourne: Victorian Government.

<sup>9</sup>Department of Health (2015) Victoria's 10-year Mental Health Plan. Melbourne: Victorian Government.