



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**  
**Aboriginal Health**

# Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership

**Guidelines and  
protocols for  
WA Health**



## Purpose

The purpose of this policy is ensure that the appropriate protocols for the recognition of Aboriginal people's traditional ownership of country are observed through the formal processes of Welcome to Country (Welcome) and Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership.

## Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is where a traditional Aboriginal custodian or Elder welcomes people to their land.

## Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership

Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership (also referred to as 'Acknowledgement of Country') is a way that the wider community can demonstrate respect for Aboriginal protocol and can be performed by any individual, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, participating in an occasion of any kind.

It is a demonstration of respect dedicated to the traditional custodians of the land or sea where the gathering of participants is being conducted

## Why arrange for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership?

Moving towards a culturally respectful and non-discriminatory health system is one of the strategic directions of the *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030*.

This policy aims to enhance cultural awareness and respect within WA Health by providing an increased recognition of 'Western Australia's Aboriginal peoples' and cultures and to build a culturally secure workforce through developing the cultural competence of non-Aboriginal staff.

The protocols of 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgement of Country' recognise the unique position of Aboriginal people in Australian culture and history.

Aboriginal people are the original Custodians of the Land and recognition of Aboriginal custodianship of country is an important statement of respect for Aboriginal people and their culture.

Protocols for welcoming visitors to country have been a part of Aboriginal culture for thousands of years.

Valuing and respecting appropriate Aboriginal ceremony can help increase mutual understanding and respect for cultural practices between Aboriginal Australians and the wider community. It also demonstrates that Aboriginal cultures are living through maintenance and practice of ceremonies and protocols.

# When should a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership be used?

Welcome to Country is required at all major WA Health official events, where members of the public, representatives of WA Health and other Government agencies or the media are present.

An Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership is appropriate for events such as meetings of staff of a hospital or health service, small or specialised public information sessions, or smaller conferences.

## Major Official Events

All WA Health official events, where members of the public, representatives of WA Health and other Government agencies or the media are present, should include a Welcome. Examples of events in this category could include, but are not limited to:

- conferences and forums held or sponsored by WA Health
- statewide meetings conducted by WA Health
- significant area-wide or local meetings conducted by WA Health
- commemorations and major festivals
- openings of new hospital wards or other facilities
- major launches of WA Health policies and programs
- significant sporting or other events where WA Health is participating or a major sponsor.

In circumstances where it is not possible for the traditional owners to provide a Welcome, it is important that a senior officer acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in the appropriate way.

In addition to a Welcome other ceremonies or practices may also be incorporated such as dances and performances.

At all times appropriate consultation and negotiation should be undertaken.

At events that are not official but where WA Health is a major sponsor, and where Aboriginal people believe it appropriate, negotiations should be undertaken with the event organiser to incorporate recognition of Aboriginal traditional ownership into the event.

## Other events

For other events, where a Welcome to Country may not be applicable, an Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership should be made. Such events might include, meetings of staff of a hospital or health services, small or specialised public information sessions, or smaller conferences.

## Observation of Aboriginal protocols

Aboriginal traditional practices differ from place to place and community to community. The planning timetable for official events needs to allow time for consultation and negotiation with Aboriginal communities.

The type of recognition afforded to Aboriginal people at an official WA Health event should be appropriate to the nature and size of the event and follow procedures as set out in this guideline.

Promotion of and the organisation for a Welcome is the responsibility of all WA Health business units and employees.

### Who to ask?

Initial contact with appropriate traditional custodians of land on which the event is to take place may not be a simple process. Observing Aboriginal protocol includes allowing time for traditional decision-making and discussion among traditional custodians. This can take some time, and should be factored into the Welcome planning process.

Not all Aboriginal people can perform a Welcome. An appropriate person, such as a recognised Elder within the local community, must give the Welcome.

In some parts of the State there are disputes about who are the traditional custodians. This should be recognised as an effect of dispossession, where people have been dislocated from their land and have returned to an area where they may not be accepted by some as traditional custodians.

It is crucial to invite local Aboriginal representatives into any planned proposal at the outset to discuss and decide the format of the Welcome, who should be invited, who should perform the Welcome and how that person will be recognised for their time and commitment.

When organising a Welcome for an event, organisers need to provide the traditional owners (in some places there is more than one group) with information on the theme and purpose of the event. The Elder(s) representing traditional owners may include in the Welcome a traditional focus linking to the theme or purpose of the event.

Organisers should also respectfully request that a Welcome in an Aboriginal language be translated into English as well. In some Welcomes, Elders use symbols and explain the significance of the symbols in their language as well as English.

In the first instance organisers should use existing contacts within their local Aboriginal community, including Aboriginal employees to identify appropriate people to perform the Welcome.

# General protocol and suggested text

## Response to Welcome to Country

It is necessary for the speaker, who follows immediately after the Welcome, to provide a response. Part of the response must acknowledge the person who delivered the Welcome. If the custodians of the land are not the traditional owners it may be necessary to acknowledge both groups. If an Aboriginal person from a different region is speaking he or she may wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and deliver a response from his or her own country.

Only the initial response is required and it is inappropriate for every speaker to provide a response or acknowledge country.

## The following text may be used in response to the traditional Welcome to Country

*“I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of this land, on which we are meeting, the [traditional name] people. It is a privilege to be standing on [traditional name] country”.*

## The following text could be used if the custodians are different:

*“I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the [traditional name] people, and the [traditional name] people who are the custodians”.*

## Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership

Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership is a way that the wider community demonstrates respect for Aboriginal protocol and can be performed by any individual, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, participating in an occasion of any kind.

It is a demonstration of respect dedicated to the traditional owners of the land or sea where the gathering of participants is being conducted.

There may be events where it is not possible, or not appropriate, for the traditional owners to provide a Welcome due to:

- unforeseen circumstances making it not possible or inappropriate to hold a traditional welcome (e.g. a death, funerals or illness)
- organisers not being able to make suitable arrangements with the traditional owners (e.g. being unable to agree on fees, not allowing sufficient time to discuss requirements)
- prior engagement of the traditional owners (e.g. personal or cultural business)
- the nature of the event being (e.g. meetings of staff of a hospital or health service, small or specialised public information sessions, or smaller conferences or workshops).

In these circumstances it is important that the most senior officer acknowledges the traditional owners of the land in the appropriate way. For example, where the event calls for the gathering of the whole staff of a hospital or health service or all staff in a directorate there should be acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land.

If possible, find out who the traditional owners are and acknowledge them specifically.

Some suggested examples include:

“I acknowledge the [name nation], the traditional owners of the land where we are meeting today.”

“I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the elders who are here today, to acknowledge those who have passed before us and to acknowledge the members of the Aboriginal community who are attending this event.”

“I would like to show my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, and of elders past and present, on which this event takes place.”

As with a Welcome to Country, only the first speaker should acknowledge traditional ownership.

## Other protocols and ceremonies

WA Health recognises and acknowledges that there are a significant number of Aboriginal traditions and protocols that necessitate respect. Some are sensitive and not discussed or shared with the broader community.

These can include:

- knowledge that is specific to gender, commonly known as ‘Women’s Business’ or ‘Men’s Business’
- not mentioning the name of a deceased Aboriginal person or showing photographic images of a deceased person unless agreed to by the relevant family
- initiation ceremonies
- the period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal people referred to as ‘Sorry Business’.

These practices may apply in some areas but not in all parts of Western Australia. If you are unsure whether a group or individual may be sensitive about an issue or issues of protocol or ceremony, you can check with your local Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) office<sup>2</sup>.

In most cases people will acknowledge if you are being intrusive and/or if they are not permitted to talk to you about traditional practices because of your age, gender status or because you do not belong to their Clan or Tribal Group.

The Aboriginal representative or representatives should be comfortable with the arrangements that have been mutually negotiated. If in any doubt about these types of issues always ask.

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<sup>2</sup> Department for Aboriginal Affairs

Telephone: 1300 651 077 General information: [info2@daa.wa.gov.au](mailto:info2@daa.wa.gov.au)

West Kimberley (08) 9194 3400 East Kimberley (08) 9166 5500 Pilbara (08) 9160 2200

Midwest (08) 9920 9600 Southern (08) 9845 7300

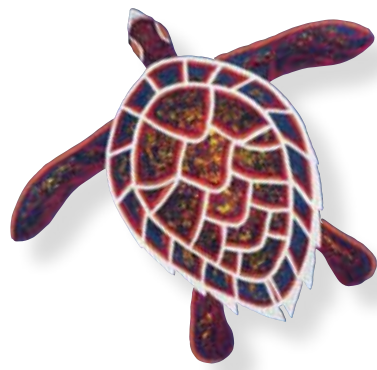
## Payments and gratuities

Providing cultural services such as Welcome to Country involves Aboriginal people's intellectual property and as such, Aboriginal people may ask for a payment or gratuity to perform the Welcome.

Payments are the responsibility of the business unit or health service organising the Welcome. This is also the case for any dancers.

## Further information

The best source from additional information from Aboriginal people and organisations in your local area. The Aboriginal Health team within your health service and your local Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) office can provide general information and local contacts.





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