CDNM Apology – delivered at the CATSINaM conference on 19th August 2022

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the unceded lands of the Eora Nation and pay my respect to the Gadigal people, the traditional owners and custodians, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and the youth of the Eora Nation. I also acknowledge the generation of nursing and midwifery students to come. I would also like to pay my deep respect to the many Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people who are in attendance today.

My name is Karen Strickland, I am the current chair of the council of deans of nursing and midwifery of Australia and New Zealand. The Council is the peak body representing the members who deliver accredited programs of education that lead to registration as a nurse or midwife in Australia and New Zealand. I am also the Executive Dean of Nursing and Midwifery at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia.

The Western Australian Government, on 27 May 1997, was the first state government to issue an apology to the stolen Generation for the atrocities that led to removal of children from Indigenous families. By 2001 all state and territory governments had issued apologies. It was not until 2007 when the Labor Party under Kevin Rudd won the federal election, did the Australian Government make ‘The Apology’ to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of the Stolen Generation the first item of business when parliament opened in 2008.

While there is widespread acceptance of our nation’s history and agreement that the wrongs of the past should never be repeated, for nursing and midwifery, there still needs to be truth telling, historical acceptance, acknowledgement of professional and institutional racism, and justice before we can begin on the road to healing and building the future. Nursing at its premise is about justice. But we must recognise the role of nurses and midwives since colonisation, through the influence of successive punitive government policies that led to nurses and midwives acting as agent of the government, contributing to the harms and trauma of Indigenous peoples.
I became the Chair of the Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery in October 2021. During my first month in office, I attended the CATSINaM Back to the Fire conference in WA from my hotel quarantine. At this conference Professor West, your CEO, challenged me on how I, as part of Council would be addressing the inequities faced by First Nations nurses and midwives from students to academic leaders, how would we respond to the now seminal paper ‘the call to action’. I made a commitment there and then, that we had to start with a program of meaningful engagement and that should begin with a formal apology from Council for the place nursing and midwifery education has in contributing to the harms and intergenerational trauma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Since October last year Professor West and Dr Lynore Geia have generously helped to guide the work of Council, working on a program of reform that will ensure we take positive action to supporting and privileging the voices and place of First Nations students, scholars, and academic leaders.

Reconciliation Australia states that ‘in a just, equitable and reconciled Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will have the same life chances and choices as non-Indigenous children, and the length and quality of a person's life will not be determined by their racial background’. They go on to state that there is a need to understand the truths of the past to avoid repeating the wrongs of the past today. This is our moment of truth, this is where we make our stand to stop repeating the wrongs and make space to build a new way.

I would like to acknowledge the place of nursing and midwifery education and research, and how this has contributed to culturally unsafe practices and has caused ongoing suffering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives and their communities through having their cultural practices and contributions to the professions and healthcare ignored, or minimised, through privileging colonial approaches. An acknowledgement is about acknowledging the harm of the past and recognising that harm can and will have enduring impacts that affect future generations.

Our formal apology is the first step to acknowledge this harm, with Council members, as leaders of nursing and midwifery education and research, partnering with CATSINaM to deliver a program of reform that promotes meaningful reconciliation to build a better future that supports culturally safe spaces for education and research, and supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, and students to flourish and to take their place as leaders in our professions.
But today we begin with the first step, the apology. This apology will not erase the pain of the past, nor the intergenerational trauma that has occurred, but it is a vital first step in our future, a vital first step towards healing, a vital first step towards walking together building on our shared history, learning from the mistakes of the past, and it is my hope that this apology opens a way forward to build a better future for nursing and midwifery in partnership with CATSINaM.

- Council of Deans Nursing and Midwifery (CDNM) as National Leaders we apologise to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for the past harms and injustices.
- Council acknowledges the profound hurt and harm nurses and midwives have caused through their practice in the professions, and we say sorry.
- We express our deep grief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been harmed by the colonial practices of nurses and midwives, informed by the policies of previous government agendas, perpetuated through normalisation of professional behaviours and institutional racism, we are sorry,
- We are sorry that those harms have contributed to the inter-generational trauma of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses, midwives, families and communities,
- Council expresses our profound grief at the suffering that has occurred in the First Australians.
- We say sorry.

As a National peak body Council will work with and through its members to collaborate with CATSINaM and with the other nursing and midwifery peak bodies as well as regulatory organisations such as ANMAC and NMBA, to take a stand towards reconciling the harms done.

We shall never forget, but together we can heal and build a better future for our nursing and midwifery professions.

Through this apology, we hope to build a strong foundation towards culturally and clinically safe nursing and midwifery practice. CATSINaM’s vision is that “Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives play a pivotal and respected role in achieving health equity and equality across the Australian health system for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities.” We commit to forming genuine partnership with CATSINaM to develop the new way forward to providing safe nursing and midwifery practice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
The Uluru Statement from the Heart calls for constitutional reforms to include the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Parliament that acknowledges and affirms your rightful place and voice on your Country, and in the places of governance. In recent months the Council have worked on developing the new strategic plan that will guide its constitutional reform called for in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, to ensure that First Nations Nursing and Midwifery leaders through CATSINaM are rightly positioned in partnership with Council and that through our work together, as nurses and midwives, we work together to improve First Nations People’s Health.

In addition to the constitutional change, Council will work in partnership with CATSINaM to develop a sustained plan of action to reform how we work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nursing and midwifery colleagues to implement *Getting em, keepin’ em, and growin’ em* to improve student outcomes, and increase the success of academic careers paths of First Nations colleagues who are currently underrepresented in academia. I am indebted to the gracious leadership of Professor Roianne West and Dr Lynore Geia as we work together to progress this important agenda.

Through this conference may we listen and learn to use our voice to affirm and to support you as you so generously share your wisdom and knowledge with us as, we walk together, as professional nursing and midwifery leaders, paving the way for meaningful reconciliation, by learning the lessons of the past, to create a better future.

Signed on behalf of the Council of Deans of Nursing & Midwifery, Australia and New Zealand:

Professor Karen Strickland, Chair of Council.
Executive Dean, Edith Cowan University