

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and their ongoing relationship with the land on which we meet, the Cadigal people, and pay my respects to the elders past and present and join with them in celebrating their ancient traditions and culture.

I came to public health through drugs and prostitution. One of the early readings that influenced me was a book by Desmond Manderson: *From Mr Sin to Mr Big*. Manderson was attempting to explain the nature of drug policy and why certain drugs came were banned from time to time whereas others seemed acceptable. He traced the use of opium in Australia, alcohol and marijuana in the USA and came up with a tenable thesis about the relationship between certain drugs and racism.

There were no surprises – the Chinese use of opium, the Irish with alcohol and later the Hispanic influence and use of marijuana. The use of prohibition was motivated by racism and effectively was a structural institutionalisation of racism.

What has been a surprise to me as I studied and engaged more and more in public health is the role that racism plays as a health issue. Let me first define what my Association means by public health. Public health includes, but goes beyond the treatment of individuals to encompass health promotion, prevention of disease and disability, recovery and rehabilitation, and disability support. This framework, together with attention to the social, economic and environmental determinants of health, informs our Association's role and priorities.

What we look for when trying to work in the area of public health is firstly the cause of the health issue. Once that has been determined we look for the

cause of the cause – and then what is causing that. Some refer to this as ‘root cause analysis’. On budget night the PHAA was honoured to host a dinner with Sir Michael Marmot who has made this issue his life work. Sir Michael’s focus has been about the relationship between the health and socio-economic status. Not surprisingly, the work he has done illustrates the wealthier someone is the healthier they are. What Sir Michael looks at is the structural issues that impact on health and health expectations of communities. Race is also integrally tied into this concept - as racism forms one of the key social determinants of health.

It is interesting the number of issues of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* that explores issues of racism and health. Indigenous issues form the basis but there are also others around refugees and people of diverse backgrounds who live in Australia. The impact of individual incidents of racism is bad enough. However, racism that is structured is what should be the focus of public health professional.

*The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* did the unexpected. Instead of just examining the physical environment and conduct in prisons, the Commissioners conducted a “root cause analysis”. The cause was clearly identified as structural racism that had a completely unacceptable proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples incarcerated. In 1992, a short year after the report, there were 14% of the total prison population made up of Australian Indigenous people. It was an embarrassment – after all the Royal Commission had provided a road map for improvement. A map for structural reform! It was an embarrassment because while they made up 14% of the total prison population by comparison Indigenous people made up less than 2.5% of the total population. That might have been embarrassing for thinking

Australians. But how embarrassed should we be now that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up a quarter of all prisoners.

We have reached a stage where Associate Professor Ted Wilkes from Curtin University argues that being in prison has now become a “right of passage” for young Aboriginal males.

What could be more obvious than this as a structural form of racism?

When will our community look beyond the stolen car and see the causes of the theft? When will we address all the causes of the social circumstances in which someone grows up? Why it is that education is so often failing young Aboriginal children? Housing is a health issue. I am not just talking about overcrowding resulting in the easy spread of infectious diseases but the ability to be able to think, to concentrate, to have ‘time out’. These are effectively foreign concepts for the majority of white Australians who have amongst the highest morbidity and mortality expectations in the world in marked contrast to their Indigenous fellow Australians.

It does not have to be this way – there are always stories of success that can form the model for further attempts to work with people, to empower individuals and groups to tackle their own issues with appropriate support.

What happened to the concept of “a fair go, mate”?

Can any of us imagine what the outcome would have been if the Northern Territory intervention had been based on a collaborative relationship between the people and the government? The injection of funds was certainly a good start. It was not rocket science to know how to go about this ... it has been done in so many places. As a specific example, just look at the number of highly respected and hugely successful Aboriginal Medical Services around the

country. Did I say highly respected? Respect! Why is it so hard to realise that this is the missing ingredient. Respect!

Bluntly, when there is a respectful relationship people do not lose their human rights based on racism. There are good things that have been achieved through the Northern Territory intervention – however, removal of human rights to achieve those on racial grounds is simply unacceptable. Throughout history the most awful precedents have been established for what people thought were good reasons.

And speaking of human rights ... last night I was privileged to hear former High Court Judge, Michael Kirby, speak at the Sydney Convention Centre. Amongst other things he spoke about the plight of a tiny minority, a miniscule number of people who take huge risks (having nothing to lose) and arrive in this country by boat. And they are not welcomed as people in need - but thrown into a form of mandatory detention. This type of mandatory detention, like all forms of mandatory detention, are an insult to our democratic systems, should be an embarrassment to our politicians and are an affront to human rights.

Why does it happen? Because the party backroom advisors are so married to polling! They believe they will win the next election by winning the middle ground. By bending their own policies and principles to what the majority are saying at any given time. We do see exceptions. But not with regard to the major parties and boat people! What is needed in this political environment is for the major parties to be leaders instead of followers – followers of the polls. People do change their mind and see clearly when there is appropriate leadership.

What the polling really reveals is that the majority of Australians are fearful. It is that fearfulness that informs their attitudes and fans the flames of racism. In my mind the reason our two major parties have adopted their racist policies on “illegal” refugees and continue to push them is because they have lost sight of the importance of leadership. When are we going to get a major party that will actually stand up on principle? This is a major advocacy challenge, a challenge that can only be met when good people support those who are already doing this work. As Edmund Burke said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

We no longer have a “white Australia” policy. So a start has been made. We celebrate our Indigenous heritage, we appreciate a wide range of our cultural diversity. However, there are still huge challenges ahead and we should start by adopting the approach of Iranian President, Sayyid Mohammad Khātāmī, who sought a “Dialogue amongst civilisations”. Let the dialogue begin by celebrating our range of civilisations within Australia.

I began this talk by celebrating the ancient culture of our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

As there are so many attempts to marginalise groups such as those from Iran and the Middle East, I would like to conclude with a word to you all and to the country mates of Khatami and a wide range of Islamic countries:

Khodafez!