I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this meeting is being held. And as I normally do I would also like to acknowledge my father and mother. I do this because both of them were so important in making sure that I had the right set of values, or coat pegs as I call them, on which I can hang my life’s decisions. My father served in the Royal Australian Air Force and the Australian Army for some 40 years. For many years, Aboriginal people who served in the Australian armed services were not paid the same as the non-Aboriginal service men and women they fought alongside. I remember raising this with my father at the time the Australian Government decided to address this injustice by compensating Aboriginal service men and women for the difference in pay. His response to me was telling: “Shane, going to war had nothing to do with what you were paid”. The strength of his values in that statement has affected my thinking since.

My mother and father met at a time when relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men and women were difficult, in fact frowned upon. When my mother told her parents that she was marrying an Aboriginal man they told her “if you walk out that gate don’t walk back in again”. I can only imagine the power that her hope gave her as she walked out that gate. It was so great that it enabled her to overcome any doubts or fears she may have held. The strength of her values is, I believe, central to my service today.

What is equity? Some have defined equity as a venerable group of rights and procedures to provide fairness, unhampered by narrow strictures or technicalities. Others, such as the Harvard Health Policy Review, have suggested that health equity is achieved when everyone has an equal probability of reaching a desired end. Still others have suggested that equity is generally taken to mean fair or just.

While there are apparently similar concepts running through all of these approaches to equity it all still brings me back to one point: someone has to determine what is meant by fair or just. In the case of the old English law it was the King and now the courts – but who decides for the health system in Australia and what is the yardstick they use? Let me leave that point there for a while and I’ll come back to it.

I am a Gangulu man; my country is to the west of what is now Rockhampton and Mount Morgan in central Queensland. As I was growing up my grandmother, aunties and uncles, my father and mother gave me three important sets of related but distinct treasures:

1. My culture – that embraces my family of people but also the land, animals and spirit and lore of Gangulu.
2. A rich collective knowledge of the experience of my family, of Gangulu and more broadly of Aboriginal peoples’ treatment at the hands of the dominant culture.
3. Pride, hope and trust – together a powerful belief that I and my sisters and brothers can protect and improve the life and spirit of Gangulu.

Intrinsic to all of these was a wisdom about what is just and fair on the one hand and unjust and unfair and lacking compassion on the other.

I learned that, essentially, it was not possible to improve the life and spirit of Gangulu if I did not protect and respect the culture and spirit of Gangulu. If anyone came to me and asked me to do something or agree to something that had the effect of destroying or damaging any the three treasures given to me, then it was not a fair or just ask.

This is not an easy point to make in Australia today. Some Australians expect that Aboriginal people will jettison our treasures, trade-off our culture, our memories and our hope in exchange for a better house, a better income, a better education or a better socio-economic status. Now even some of my mob are saying “oh well it may be a good trade”.

I am not one who is prepared in my personal, professional or

* This is an edited version of an address given by Professor Shane Houston at the fourth international conference of the International Society for Equity in Health in Adelaide on 11 September 2006.

---

**Abstract**

Equity has in many instances been framed around the notion of fairness. But the metric used to determine what is fair leaves some people at a disadvantage because the things that they value are not always taken properly into account. If I value mangoes and you value oranges is a measure of fairness based on how many oranges I seek appropriate? If I am expected to give up my love of mangoes in order to get ahead is that fair? The debate about judging equity – about measuring fairness – needs to find the conceptual and methodological space to allow the voices and claims of the other to be heard.
community life to make that trade. And I am sure that there have been, still are and will be many others who will take this view.

Let me tell you why I am so confident.

Throughout my life I have learned about and worked with people who have taken up the fight to change the status quo, who were fighting for fairness and for justice. And there have been many over the 218 years of Australian history.

**Pemulwy** was an Aboriginal man who led a resistance movement around Sydney during the early years of the colony. He was spurred to action because of the unjust treatment of Aboriginal people by the colonialists.

**Jack Pattern** was a worker who travelled the countryside talking to and helping to organise the struggle of Aboriginal peoples. He helped protect and promote Aboriginal growth and resurgence over many decades. They were instrumental in convening the Day of Mourning march and meeting in Sydney in 1938. There were times when he and his colleagues Bill Ferguson and William Cooper were at real risk, but cool minds and strong hearts prevailed. It is important to understand that the last acknowledged massacre occurred in 1928.

Being told of and learning more about these leaders has encouraged generations of Aboriginal people to take up where they left off, fighting to protect the things they then and we now value – these treasures.

Let me tell you of just two or three of these more recent heroes. Forty years ago this month a group of Aboriginal men and women walked off a pastoral property in the Northern Territory owned by an absent British lord. They moved across the other side of the river off the pastoral property and sat down; they told the property manager that they would not be coming back unless things got better – unless they were treated fairly.

Most Australians knew that many Aboriginal people worked in the cattle industry and that Aboriginal stockmen were highly regarded. Most Australians knew that Aboriginal workers were paid less than non-Aboriginal workers, but few did much about it. Most Australians did not know where Wave Hill was. Most Australians did not know of the Gurindji and all but a handful of Australians were totally unaware of who **Vincent Lingiari** was. All that changed when Vincent Lingiari led the Gurindji mob off that pastoral property 600 kilometres south of Darwin.

These events and this man are a significant part of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ struggle for recognition of land rights and for life in Australia.

Governments did all they could to discourage Vincent Lingiari. They showed that they were not interested in the facts; they were interested only in discouraging land rights for Aboriginal people. For example, ministers of the day intervened to stop the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies from conducting research that might encourage the Gurindji’s claim for land. They dismissed their own welfare officers because they advocated support of the Gurindji’s claim.

But Vincent Lingiari was not deterred. He fought on – he took his case to the Australian people and visited east coast cities over several years talking to unions, churches and anyone that would listen. He was a champion of the Aboriginal land rights movement. Vincent Lingiari took on the British aristocracy, the Australian Government, public opinion and his own fears and doubts. And he won. Vincent did not engage in this nine-year struggle for self gain; he did it for the greater good.

In 1974, the Australian Government acknowledged the Gurindji’s land claim and through a simple gesture of pouring a handful of soil into the hand of Vincent Lingiari, Gough Whitlam, the Australian Prime Minister, said:

> “Vincent Lingiari, I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australia law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands this piece of the earth itself as a sign that we restore them to you and your children forever.”

Vincent, after having waged a battle, responded to the Australian Prime Minister and people:

> “Let us live happily together as mates, let us not make it hard for each other.”

The victory of Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji was the seed from which many decades of the Aboriginal lands rights movement would flow.

**Oodgeroo Noonuccal** (her English name was Kath Walker) was born in 1920 on North Stradbroke Island off the coast near Brisbane. She attended Dulwich Primary; left school and became a domestic in Brisbane at the age of 13. As an Aboriginal person, she said, “there wasn’t the slightest possibility of getting ‘a better job’ [even] if you stayed on at school”.

Oodgeroo served in the Australian Women’s Army Service from 1942 to 1944, a period when she was not even counted as a person in Australia. She published her first book of poetry, *We Are Going*, in 1964, going on to become a trailblazer in published Aboriginal writing in Australia. Oodgeroo was Queensland State Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) for 10 years in the 1960s and from 1972 was managing director of the Noonuccal-Nughie Education Cultural Centre on Stradbroke Island. Throughout her life, she was a renowned and admired campaigner for Aboriginal rights, promoter of Aboriginal cultural survival, educator and environmentalist.

Her life was not easy; her pain was often great. Yet she could find the spirit and heart to encourage an outlook on life that was reaffirming of the things that were good. Oodgeroo was a woman who suffered under a government system that robbed our people of wages, that sent us to a prison island and that denied our identity. But her heart was good.

Her son was an angry young man, and a campaigner, too. **Dennis Walker** was an active voice in the Aboriginal struggle for justice, particularly in the health area, during the 1970s and early 1980s. He was in and out of jail and he carried his anger clearly for all to see.

I remember one of the first times I met young Dennis. It was at
a meeting of the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation and I remember Dennis passionately getting up advocating that Aboriginal people should take up arms. I responded thinking he was talking metaphorically, that he was issuing a rallying call. But I was wrong; his intention was that we should take up arms and start a violent resistance to Aboriginal oppression.

There was no doubt that both he and his mother could see the same injustice and pain. But while Dennis called Aboriginal people to arms, his mother took another tack. In a famous poem

I could tell of heartbreak, hatred blind
I could tell of crimes that shame mankind
Of brutal wrong and deeds malign
Of rape and murder, son of mine

But I'll tell instead of brace and fine
When lives of black and white entwine
And men of brotherhood combine
This would I tell you, son of mine

Rob Riley was a young turk of the Aboriginal movement of the 1980s and 1990s. He was a friend of mine. He was the youngest chair of the National Aboriginal Conference, an articulate and passionate person. Rob was widely regarded as one of the great Aboriginal leaders of the modern era; he was at the centre of debates that have polarised views on race relations in Australia: national land rights, the treaty, deaths in custody, self-determination, the justice system, native title and the Stolen Generations. There is a great book by Quentin Beresford on the life of Riley and you should read his fantastic story.

Brother Rob’s family history demonstrates the intergenerational harm to Aboriginal people that racism in Australia has created. Under the racist WA 1905 Aborigines Act, his maternal grandmother was imprisoned in her adolescence in the Moore River Settlement, north of Perth. A ministerial warrant was used to remove her from her family in the late 1920s and, despite repeated efforts to secure her release, she languished in Moore River for the rest of her life. She once told authorities “this place would I tell you son of mine

Health Promotion Journal of Australia 2006 : 17 (3)

Rob Riley was there at Noonkanbah when the conservative government organised police protection for a mining company’s destruction of sacred sites. Rob was there in the middle of many of the contemporary watersheds in Australian Aboriginal affairs, the Stolen Generations Inquiry, the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody, the attempts by the WA Parliament to destroy the Aboriginal Legal Service. Rob was there at the centre of all.

Rob had two sayings he used often that summed him up:

You can’t be wrong if you are right

And

You don’t stop fighting for justice simply because those around you don’t like it you just keep on fighting.

I tell you all this because it is important for you to understand what fairness and justice for us mob is. The lives and loss of these people helps frame for us what is just and fair. It speaks to the fact that we hold the treasures given to us in a venerable place. These treasures form the basis on which we will judge equity; they are our yardsticks. This is how my mob will approach the notions of equity. Equity for us will be influenced by whether the proposition protects and multiplies these treasures, these things that we value.

We will judge the efforts to improve our health and spirit today by how well or not these efforts protect or multiply our treasures. The valuing goes not just to peripheral things but also to core issues of life and death.

Let me give you a concrete example. The mother of a friend of mine was diagnosed with end stage renal failure and told that she would have to move to Perth for dialysis or she would soon die. Now she had the calmness of spirit to sit and think about what was right, what was fair not just to her but to her family and community and she made the decision to forgo treatment in Perth even though this would shorten her life considerably. She decided that what was right and just was for her to stay in her community and spend time with her grannies and other Children’s Home where he was denied knowledge of both his family and his Aboriginal heritage. Rob was assailed by experiences of sexual abuse, loneliness and wanting to belong. Like so many of the Stolen Generations, Rob was denied access to his culture and this for someone like Rob would have been a tremendous weight to carry. But Rob shouldered that burden and many others with an innate pride and spirit.

I can still recall with immense admiration, with heart-swelling pride, the occasion of Rob’s disclosure of his abuse in Sister Kate’s. I can still recall seeing the pain on his face as he recounted to an audience at a book launch those horrifying times.

I can still recall hearing from friends of his suicide on 1 May 1996. Just 10 years ago. It is said that Rob felt weighed down by the unresolved traumas of his exposure to institutionalisation, segregation and racism, and his sense of betrayal by the Australian political system arising from its failure to deliver justice to Aboriginal people.

Despite all of this, it is not his death that sums up his legacy and contribution to the Aboriginal spirit. Rob was there at Noonkanbah when the conservative government organised police protection for a mining company’s destruction of sacred sites. Rob was there in the middle of many of the contemporary watersheds in Australian Aboriginal affairs, the Stolen Generations Inquiry, the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody, the attempts by the WA Parliament to destroy the Aboriginal Legal Service. Rob was there at the centre of all.

Rob had two sayings he used often that summed him up:

You can’t be wrong if you are right

And

You don’t stop fighting for justice simply because those around you don’t like it you just keep on fighting.

I tell you all this because it is important for you to understand what fairness and justice for us mob is. The lives and loss of these people helps frame for us what is just and fair. It speaks to the fact that we hold the treasures given to us in a venerable place. These treasures form the basis on which we will judge equity; they are our yardsticks. This is how my mob will approach the notions of equity. Equity for us will be influenced by whether the proposition protects and multiplies these treasures, these things that we value.

We will judge the efforts to improve our health and spirit today by how well or not these efforts protect or multiply our treasures. The valuing goes not just to peripheral things but also to core issues of life and death.
children teaching them the things they needed to live a full life, an Aboriginal life. She decided to protect the treasures of culture and grandchildren.

It is also the case that a fair share of progress, of access to services, is reduced if Aboriginal people decided to continue our special relationship to our country. If we desire access to the range of, say, health services available to other Australians then we are expected to compromise the special cultural relationship with our country by leaving or surrendering our ability to nurture this relationship. We are expected to move. This geographic effect can be seen in the different levels of service funded by Medicare across rural and remote parts of Australia when compared to, say, places like Double Bay in Sydney’s affluent eastern suburbs. It seems to me that Aboriginal people are offered on many occasions (not all) greater equity in health and health services if we will give up something or change ourselves. There are many people in senior decision-making positions, including politicians, who have criticised Aboriginal people for choosing to live ‘way out there’. The corollary of this is that we cannot expect the same level of services as people who live in our cities receive, and it’s our fault because we choose to live ‘way out there’.

Let me put it more concretely. If Aboriginal people value the good that we find in country, kin and culture more than the good that we find in a quarter acre, individualism and middle class aspiration, do we give up the right to fairness and justice at the hands of health services and systems? And in order to achieve greater equity in the health system and in its services, do we need to give up the good we find in country, kin and culture? Will this make us healthier?

If the cost to Aboriginal people of owning the quarter acre, being a successful individual and a member of the aspirational middle class is the surrender of country, kin and culture, are we being robbed? It all depends on whose perspective you take, or perhaps where you stand.

Let’s not think that Aboriginal people want to return to life as it was 220 years ago. We want our kids to enjoy the treasures that generations have gathered up for them but we also want our kids to have the opportunity to have a good education, to live safely, to have a good home, to have a good job and to have the capability to live the sort of life they value.

Let me put it this way. Australia has always juxtaposed its objectives for Aboriginal people in terms wrapped in sameness with non-Aboriginal Australians – same education, same housing, same health, same jobs, same values, etc. But Aboriginal people have always framed our future in terms of difference – Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal values, Aboriginal spirit, Aboriginal community control, and Aboriginal self-determination.

Putting these thoughts together, it seems to me that we have an especially important policy dilemma for health people concerned with equity – how can we construct a way forward if we can’t agree on and service a conception of what the good is? Is the good Aboriginal people seek to be valued less or valued at all in judgements about equity – about fairness and justice because we value some different things?

We can largely agree – let me say quickly – on some of the major items of what needs to improve. We all agree, I would think, about the need to improve health and well-being, physical environment, education, and safety of Aboriginal children. But it is the case that as we delve further behind these broad agreements we find differences in the nature of the good we seek, in the relative priority between issues and in the question ‘does the end justify the means’?

If we are to move forward on Aboriginal health and well-being we cannot ignore the voices of difference. We need to understand that success is intrinsically bound up in our ability to respect and address the link between our capability to be free to be who we are – our ability to function as Aboriginal people – as much as it is about the alleviation of physical, emotional and social ills that bedevil many of my mob.

Aboriginal people are being expected to give up things in too many cases. You know I have watched policies in Aboriginal schooling that have sent young, relatively inexperienced teachers out into the most difficult teaching environments and I am amazed that people wonder why we are not getting results. Shouldn’t we be sending our most experienced teachers out to these complex and challenging teaching assignments so that we can put our best efforts into solving the problem? And why is it that in respect of education the debate is almost always about Aboriginal kids leaving family and community to get an education in far-off urban centres and never about building the country’s best schools in Aboriginal communities?

I watched a TV program the other night and saw a young Aboriginal woman from a Cape York community being hounded to the aircraft door by a man telling her she must leave her community to get a job, there was nothing there for her, that the community will only hold her back. I watched as the program told of how her friends and family were pleading with her not to go and how much of an effort this non-Aboriginal person had to exert to make sure she got on the plane.

She was being pushed to leave her community to find a job; she was going to be an orange packer. I was left wondering whether I was watching a fair and equitable distribution of burden here, on the one hand between that carried by this young woman, having to leave her family and community to take up a job that most non-Aboriginal Australians won’t put themselves out to do, and on the other the burden carried by governments in terms of their efforts to build meaningful training and work opportunities in Aboriginal communities.

Why is it we are expected to surrender ourselves and what it is we value in order to get a fair share – how is that fair? How is that just?

Economics is about doing better. Health economics is a crusade about doing better in health. Many people think economics is just about saving money; they often do not see it as about being fairer and more just. Equity in health cannot just be about
numbers; it has to explicitly be about the values of the people concerned.

It has to be about the lessons that Oodgeroo and Rob taught us. Just last month I was part of the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide conference. Three thousand five hundred Indigenous people from around the world attended that gathering in Canada. They brought with them ideas and examples of programs and services that have worked because they have paid attention to Aboriginal values and culture.

When I returned to Australia I was asked to give a lecture at the University of Sydney’s Department of Rural Health at Broken Hill. At that lecture I was asked what was startling or most rewarding about attending the international gathering. I replied honestly and earnestly that it was the fact that I did not have to seek permission to be Aboriginal; I did not have to think twice about using my values and my culture as the bedrock of what I said and how I acted. I had permission to care about and talk about things that Aboriginal people value like spirit, culture, lore and collective experience of injustice. This was incredibly liberating; I cannot do that in many settings in Australia, I always have to think twice.

It is strangely spiritual and practically reassuring to come back from that gathering to this one and be able to talk about what it is I, as an Aboriginal man, value, and why it is important and how this relates to equity in health. In Australia today it seems that to be overtly Aboriginal draws criticism – many people feel unable to live out their lives according to the treasures given to us by grandparents and our culture.

Forty years ago Vincent Lingiari gave many Aboriginal communities the hope that something better was possible and that the future can be based on the things Aboriginal people value. As the Australian songwriters Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly put it:

- That was the story of Vincent Lingiari
- But this is the story of something much more
- How power and privilege can not move a people
- Who know where they stand and stand in their law

Who would have thought a strike by a bunch of Aboriginal people in the remote parts of the Northern Territory would achieve what they did. From little things big things grow…

Who would have thought that the idea of one person could turn into a worldwide movement of Aboriginal people committed to nourishing our spirit as the people of the land? From little things big things grow…

Equity is about what is fair and just but the lenses that we need to look at it through are the values we hold – the things we hold dear to our spirit and hearts. And we need to find the spaces and the voices and the art of being who we are – to tell and listen. Here we are at a conference on equity and health with 200 people. From little things big things grow…

Remember Vincent, Oodgeroo and Rob’s stories. These are examples of how important our treasures are to Aboriginal people – use the lessons and clarity they offer carefully over the next few days as signposts to what is important in a discussion about fairness, about equity. Use them respectfully; they have much power in them.

Author

Shane Houston, Office of System Performance and Aboriginal Policy, Department of Health and Community Services, Northern Territory Government

Correspondence

Professor Shane Houston, Assistant Secretary, Office of System Performance and Aboriginal Policy, Department of Health and Community Services, Northern Territory Government, GPO Box 40596, Casuarina Northern Territory 0811.
E-mail: shane.houston@nt.gov.au