

2025 Special Issue on Indigenous Health

We are very proud that this *MJA* Special Issue on Indigenous health — “Carving our path with spirit, strength and solidarity” — is the second to be edited by a team of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guest Editors: Professor Pat Dudgeon (Bardi), Professor Jaquelyne Hughes (Wagadagam), Associate Professor Michelle Kennedy (Wiradjuri), Professor Kelvin Kong (Worimi), Professor Odette Pearson (Eastern Kuku-Yalanji and Torres Strait Islander), and Associate Professor Paul Saunders (Biripi). This Special Issue consists of work led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and that underwent careful assessment, discussion, and guidance by the Guest Editors across all stages of the editorial and publication process. The final published articles reflect the care that went into this undertaking. The Editorial¹ for this Special Issue is a reflective piece by the Guest Editors, where they examine the vision and impact of this issue. This year, as last,² we received many more articles than could be accommodated in one issue, and we plan to publish additional articles from this Special Issue process later in the year.

At the *MJA*, we understand the privilege that it is to publish articles from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. We also understand that a journal like the *MJA* has a duty to acknowledge and address the imbalance of power that has led in the past to publication in the *MJA* being a hard and uncomfortable experience for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors. As editors of this Journal, we have an ongoing commitment to ensuring that the *MJA* is a welcoming and respectful place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and their publications, and we look forward to receiving future submissions.

For the *MJA* team, it has been an enormous privilege to work with the Guest Editors, and we thank them for their generosity in sharing their time and expertise. We are also very privileged to have on the cover of this Special Issue the powerful carving by Uncle Paul Scott that describes the issue's purpose (Box). His story is a reminder of a shared future: “a story of resilience, of shared journeys, and of walking together, side by side, with respect for each other and the land beneath our feet”. ■

Virginia Barbour
on behalf of the *MJA* team, *Medical Journal of Australia*,
Sydney, NSW.

doi: 10.5694/mja2.52700

¹ Saunders P, Dudgeon P, Kennedy M, et al. Indigenous Health Special Issue 2025: Carving our path with spirit, strength and solidarity. *Med J Aust* 2025; 223: 28–29.

² Special Issue in partnership with the Lowitja Institute: centring Indigenous knowledges. *Med J Aust* 2024; 221. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2024/221/1/special-issue-partnership-lowitja-institute-centring-indigenous-knowledges> ■

Artist's story

The Red Belly Black Snake Walking Stick

Artist: **Paul D Scott**

Proud Dharawal, Wandandian
man from the Yuin Nation



This walking stick holds a story born from the bush and the sea, shaped by the landscapes of the South Coast of New South Wales and the Shoalhaven coastline. As a Yuin

man raised in Nowra, I carry the knowledge handed down to me by my Elders. Knowledge of Country, of animals, of art, and of spirit. That knowledge is not mine to keep; I pass it to my children and their children, as it was passed to me.

My art is inspired by the rivers, beaches, and bushlands that surround us. Over the years, I've encountered countless native animals: kangaroos, wombats, goannas, snakes, freshwater turtles — each connected to story and place. Among them, the red belly black snake has always stood out. Its beauty, strength, and presence on Country have left a lasting mark on me.

One day, I came across a long branch, a plain stick with no clear identity. It was a piece of Blackbutt, a native hardwood known for its strength and durability. When I peeled back the bark, I saw the outline of a snake's head at the top. That was the moment it began to take shape. I wasn't sure at first what kind of snake it would become, but my thoughts kept returning to the red belly. As I rasped and carved, the snake revealed itself, winding around the stick, its body emerging from the grain of the wood.

Bringing the snake to life took hours of careful work. I mixed deep black paint for its upper body, white for the scales, and a rich red for the belly. The red belly black snake now coils its way up the stick in full form, a symbol of unity between the snake and the wood, a reconciliation between the natural form and the carved spirit.

Every colour on the stick carries meaning:

Blue wavy lines represent the rivers and the sea

Ochres symbolise the land

Green reflects the bush

Bright yellow marks the beaches

These elements connect directly to the South Coast and reflect the traditional stories and colours of our people. The style of the carving draws from ancestral practices, respecting the old ways while telling a new story through contemporary hands.

To walk with this stick is to walk with culture. It does not only support your steps; it speaks. It tells of Country, of connection, of identity. And although it is shaped by the South Coast and the Shoalhaven, the story it carries reaches across all Nations. It is a story of resilience, of shared journeys, and of walking together, side by side, with respect for each other and the land beneath our feet.

