

# Land, culture, rights and self-determination: foundations of Indigenous health

This issue of the *MJA* is the second of this year with a specific focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. It includes three articles that were originally selected by the Guest Editors for the NAIDOC week Special Issue, which was published in July, 2025.<sup>1,2</sup> We were in the fortunate position of having too many accepted articles for that issue, so we are delighted to now publish them, alongside other articles on Indigenous health that went through regular *MJA* editorial processes.

Two of the articles previously selected are research articles: a study by Alasdair Vance and colleagues evaluates Elder-governed cultural therapy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander young people with mental health conditions,<sup>3</sup> and Karrina DeMasi and colleagues describe the development of an Aboriginal women-led maternal and child health model when cardiometabolic complications are experienced in pregnancy.<sup>4</sup> The third article is a perspective from Paul Gray and colleagues that discusses the need to move towards epistemic pluralism, cultural safety, and critical reflexivity in Australian psychology.<sup>5</sup> Together, these articles reflect the depth and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research and community, strength-based approaches. These values are also reflected in the other articles of this issue, which demonstrate a huge diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and critical thought, ranging from voluntary assisted dying in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, to exploring the need for meaningful partnerships in health and medical research grant applications.

This issue was timed for the 18th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples — an important international resolution. The editorial for this issue reflects on the Declaration and, despite endorsing it, the failure of successive Australian governments to incorporate it into national law. As the editorial concludes “The 18th anniversary of UNDRIP is a historical marker but serves as a powerful call to action. It reminds us that health is inextricably linked to human rights, self-determination and cultural integrity”.

The cover for this issue of the *MJA* features an image of Mer Island in the Torres Strait. Sophie Pitt, who authored the editorial, explains the how this image calls us to recognise the links between the escalating climate crisis, Indigenous rights, and health, as it represents “both a celebration of the enduring connection to Country and a reminder of what can be lost” (Box).

For this issue, as for the previous NAIDOC week issue, we are very grateful for all the expertise and wisdom generously provided by the Guest Editors, and the care they took in assessing and selecting papers for these two Indigenous health issues. ■

Virginia Barbour  
Editor-in-Chief, *Medical Journal of Australia*, Sydney, NSW.

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## Cover connection

The cover of this issue of the *MJA* features an image of Mer Island in the Torres Strait. As a Torres Strait Islander (Meriam) woman, the health of Country is the foundation of the health and wellbeing of my people. This profound connection between land, culture, and health is a lived reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

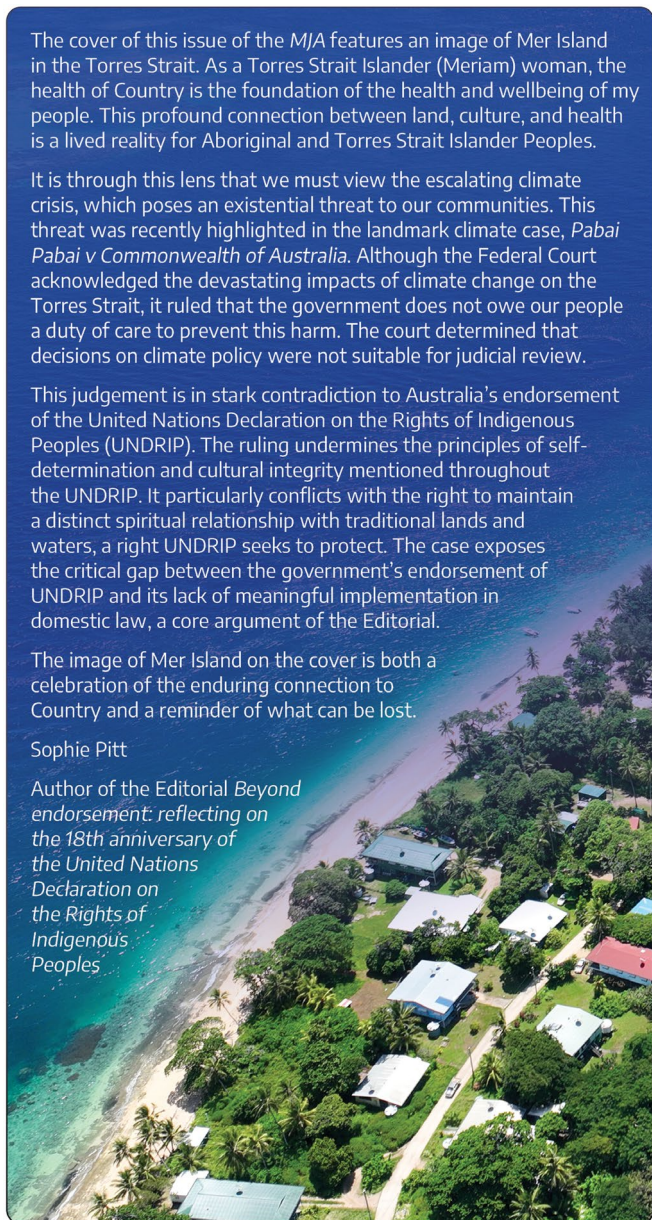
It is through this lens that we must view the escalating climate crisis, which poses an existential threat to our communities. This threat was recently highlighted in the landmark climate case, *Pabai Pabai v Commonwealth of Australia*. Although the Federal Court acknowledged the devastating impacts of climate change on the Torres Strait, it ruled that the government does not owe our people a duty of care to prevent this harm. The court determined that decisions on climate policy were not suitable for judicial review.

This judgement is in stark contradiction to Australia's endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The ruling undermines the principles of self-determination and cultural integrity mentioned throughout the UNDRIP. It particularly conflicts with the right to maintain a distinct spiritual relationship with traditional lands and waters, a right UNDRIP seeks to protect. The case exposes the critical gap between the government's endorsement of UNDRIP and its lack of meaningful implementation in domestic law, a core argument of the Editorial.

The image of Mer Island on the cover is both a celebration of the enduring connection to Country and a reminder of what can be lost.

Sophie Pitt

Author of the Editorial *Beyond endorsement: reflecting on the 18th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*



- 1 Barbour V. 2025 Special issue on Indigenous health [Editor's Choice]. *Med J Aust* 2025; 223: 3. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2025/223/1/2025-special-issue-indigenous-health>
- 2 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. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2025/223/1/indigenous-health-special-issue-2025-carving-our-path-spirit-strength-and>
- 3 Vance A, McGaw J, Winther J, et al. Country revealing the way: evaluating Elder-governed Cultural Therapy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people with mental health conditions. *Med J Aust* 2025; 223: 304-311.
- 4 DeMasi K, Shen D, McColl P, et al. An Aboriginal women-led approach to design a maternal and child health model when cardiometabolic complications are experienced in pregnancy in South Australia. *Med J Aust* 2025; 223: 312-319.
- 5 Gray P, Darlaston-Jones D, Dudgeon AM P, et al. The contribution of evidence-based practice and the practice-based evidence approaches to contemporary Australian psychology: implications for culturally safe practice. *Med J Aust* 2025; 223: 282-288. ■