Within the Australian health care system exists an inherent need to improve the health status of the Australian Indigenous population.

By increasing affordability, availability, accessibility and the cultural appropriateness of health care services, effective and positive change can be achieved in Indigenous health.

The authors of this paper have compiled information surrounding cultural issues that non-Indigenous health professionals may face when working with Indigenous peoples, in an attempt to break down current barriers to provide culturally safe health care. This information has been based on contemporary qualitative research published by the World Health Organization, peer-reviewed sources, and analysis of quantitative data produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The term 'cultural safety' is used in contemporary literature to connote active behavioural strategies that ensure appropriate cultural engagement with Indigenous peoples is genuinely effective and appropriate. While cultural awareness and sensitivity are essential elements within the contemporary term cultural safety, the use of these terms has now been abolished in order to emphasise the requirement for skills to be actively incorporated into clinical practice and not just merely understood intellectually.

It is imperative for health care professionals to be aware of the factors that underlie behavioural risks associated with morbidity and mortality rates of the Australian Indigenous population (Jackson et al. 2010). It is also important to understand individual and collective definitions of health will vary depending on perceived values and priorities of a specific cultural group.

According to Swan and Raphael (1995, p7): “health (from an Indigenous perspective) does not mean the physical wellbeing of the individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community. This is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life”.

In addition to this definition, it is also important to note the strong connections Australian Indigenous peoples have to the land. As a result of past government policies following colonisation, the forcible displacement of Indigenous populations from their lands has had a profound impact on their current physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing, and thus their health.

Health professionals need to be able to demonstrate an awareness of other social determinants of health such as stereotyping, racism, discrimination and hostility that directly affect health outcomes.

Cultural safety can be as simple as having manners, truly listening and treating people with dignity and respect, or as complex as having discussions around culture and power. Cultural safety extends beyond cultural groups and includes age, gender, socioeconomic status, and religious or spiritual beliefs. Conversely, unsafe cultural practice is any practice that disempowers, diminishes, demeans or compromises the cultural identity or wellbeing of an individual (Smith 2004).

Health professionals must, therefore, carefully think, deliberate, account for, and show concern for the beliefs and values of each individual in order to prevent cultural stereotyping, and furthermore demonstrate cultural safety. These relational skills are essential at both an organisational level and at a personal level in order to help build a therapeutic rapport with Indigenous peoples and, in turn, improve their health care provision (Foronda 2008).

When an understanding of holistic health is developed, alongside knowledge of the factors and relevant statistical research and contemporary literature that may underpin health status, the challenges associated with ‘Closing the Gap’ in current health equalities become increasingly apparent; and the need for culturally safe health care provision becomes equally imperative. If this gap is to be bridged by 2018, as the Australian government has publically set out to achieve, adoption of culturally safe care provision by both health organisations and individual health professionals must be achieved in order to prevent Indigenous peoples feeling further disempowered.

REFERENCES
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BY TARNEE BIDZINSKI, GRACE BOUSTEAD, REBECCA GLEAVE, JENNIFER RUSSO AND SEAN SCOTT

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