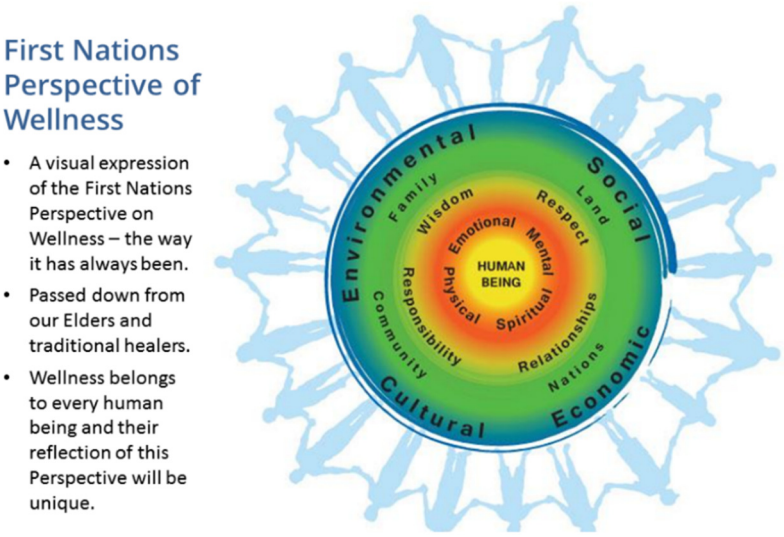
Healthcare for Aboriginal, First Nations & Indigenous Peoples Who Are Incarcerated: Current thinking

LISTED BELOW ARE SELECTED ARTICLES, reports, etc., focussed on culturally sensitive healthcare for incarcerated Aboriginal, First Nations and Indigenous peoples, which have been included in past postings on the End-of-Life Care Behind Bars website. Feedback welcomed: https://bit.ly/4dZtGsZ ***BRA***

Overview

Culturally sensitive end-of-life care for Indigenous peoples who are incarcerated

END-OF-LIFE CARE BEHIND BARS WEBSITE | Online – 6 November 2025 – Culturally sensitive healthcare for Indigenous peoples who are incarcerated is steadily gaining traction in the literature. Less attention, however, is given to palliative and end-of-life care (P&EoL) for one of society's most vulnerable and marginalized populations; research focussed on the Indigenous peoples of Australia, Canada and New Zealand is dominant. No matter from what cultural perspective P&EoL is viewed, there remains striking similarities in the observations and conclusions drawn in many reviews of the literature from one country to the next, and from one culture to the next. There appears to be a serious lack of studies, however, that directly examine end-of-life care for Indigenous peoples who are incarcerated. This absence in itself is telling. There is an urgent need for future research that centers Indigenous voices and experiences in correctional healthcare... **Full text:** https://bit.ly/47ERezL



Source: First Nations Health Authority, Canada: https://bit.ly/4Bwrqnk

Australia

Why Aboriginal-led prison healthcare is urgently needed in Victoria

| Online – 15 October 2026 – It's been 35 years since the final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was signed, and many of the recommendations remain relevant and hold the answer to avoidable, tragic deaths. Incarcerated or not, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain a vital part of the Community. It's essential that they have access to culturally safe, trauma-informed health and wellbeing care, delivered by Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCO) with the expertise and cultural authority to do so (**see sidebar**). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have further complex and cultural needs that are rarely met in prison. The healthcare arrangements operate within a broader justice system shaped by racism built into laws, policies and systems, where Aboriginal people are overrepresented and their health needs are routinely deprioritised. The result is fragmented care, a lack of cultural safety, poor continuity between prison and community health services, as well as inadequate responses to mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/4ygX9FX

Campaign to change healthcare in custody

ABOUT TIME | Online – 10 July 2026 – People in prisons continue to face preventable harm due to poor healthcare. Despite decades of evidence, prison healthcare continues to be outsourced to private companies with a profit-driven model that does not meet people's needs. This hits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people especially hard, because the wider justice system is shaped by racism, Aboriginal people are imprisoned at much higher rates and their needs are often misunderstood and deprioritised. The result is patchy care, poor continuity between prison staff and community health services, lack of cultural support and inadequate responses to mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. That is why the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) is campaigning to 'Transform Care in Custody.' VACCHO is advocating for reform in Victoria's prisons that will benefit not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders but all people in prison. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/44XWAom

> **N.B.** 'Strengthening Aboriginal Health Care in Custodial Settings,' Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (2025): https://bit.ly/4vI7lX3

Aboriginal health services to be provided at Wellington prison

ABOUT TIME | Online – 12 December 2025 – Culturally safe, Aboriginal-led healthcare services will be provided to women at the Wellington Correctional Centre and to incarcerated First Nations men for the first time, under a partnership between Justice Health New South Wales and Wellington Aboriginal Corporation Health Service (WACHS). WACHS will be delivering "trauma-informed, culturally safe healthcare to Aboriginal patients in custody in the state's Central West," as part of an in-reach model based on the Justice Our Way program. This will see local Aboriginal community-based health services working with First Nations people in the Wellington prison and those transitioning to the community. The Justice Our Way program [was] launched in 2014 to address a "critical gap in support for Aboriginal people transitioning out of the justice system" and is currently delivered in Dillwynia and Silverwater prisons. **Full text (scroll down to p.12):** https://bit.ly/3XOj6N1

The shell and the circle: Indigenous health equity across the Pacific

LAW SOCIETY JOURNAL | Online – 15 October 2025 – To date, the achievements of successive governments under Closing the Gap policies have fallen well short of their targets. Over a decade of research and data confirms that Aboriginal prisoners continue to exhibit greater levels of ill-health than their non-Aboriginal counterparts; chronic health conditions remain more prevalent and they leave prison to face poorer health outcomes and life expectancies. As people flow continuously in and out of custody, the prison gates become a kind of delta where the rivers of communal and custodial health issues converge. Navigator roles present an opportunity to create culturally safe continuity of care, thereby helping patients move towards self-determination. Criminological research suggests a prisoner's health is a keystone variable affecting their reintegration. Positive health interventions in prison are crucial to an individual's prospects of rehabilitation. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3JepiKp

Coroner calls for action on culturally safe care for Aboriginal prisoners

NATIONAL JUSTICE PROJECT

| Online – 26 May 2025 – The National Justice Project has welcomed a Coroner's recommendations for the provision of culturally safe care to Aboriginal prisoners in Western Australia following an inquest into the death in custody of a 41 year-old Martu woman... The inquest findings detail missed opportunities for treatment and care as well as evidence that the care she received was not culturally safe. In order to provide culturally safe care to Aboriginal prisoners in Western Australia, the Department of Justice should redouble its efforts to recruit Aboriginal staff at its prisons, including medical officers, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and prisoner support officers. Culturally safe care for Aboriginal prisoners in Western Australia may also be achieved by establishing partnerships with Aboriginal community controlled health organisations and medical services, to provide access to visits from Aboriginal health practitioners, and by developing an Aboriginal Elders visiting program. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3Fr2q8G

Victoria's prison healthcare system should match community healthcare

THE BULLETIN | Online – 9 May 2025 – In Victoria, if a person in prison is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, they do not get access to culturally competent care through Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations. In Victoria, prison healthcare is provided by for-profit private companies contracted by the state government. Imprisoned peoples' physical health and/or social and emotional well-being is at the mercy of prison officers and prison healthcare providers. International law requires prisoners should enjoy the same standards of healthcare that are available in the community. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommended prison health care be culturally safe and "be of an equivalent standard to that available to the general public". This recommendation still has not been implemented. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3RT6VeT

Cancer diagnosis not properly explained to inmate or family…

ABC NEWS | Online – 16 April 2025 – A terminally ill First Nations prison inmate was denied the opportunity to die on Country... A coroner's inquest investigating the death of a man in custody in New South Wales has found he was not made aware of the severity of his illness. He was gravely ill by the time his family became aware of his condition. The coroner found that earlier communication of his diagnosis "wouldn't have saved him" but could have given the man the chance to die on Country. The coroner identified several communication failures by Justice Health and found that the severity of the cancer diagnosis was not explained to the man or his family. Recommendations have been made to Justice Health & Corrective Services New South Wales regarding their handling of end-of-life care for inmates. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/4cENlwx

To die on Country

Country with a capital "C" refers to the culturally defined homelands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for whom "Country" is a complex term, encompassing cultural practices, customs, law, place, language, spiritual beliefs, material sustenance, family and identity all in relation to the lands, waterways and seas to which people are connected.

Source: 'The Routledge Handbook of Australian Indigenous Peoples and Futures' (2003): https://bit.ly/3RrIUeM

"Pivotal moment for reform": Review into First Nations healthcare in prisons calls for sweeping changes

NATIONAL JUSTICE PROJECT

| Online – 2 February 2025 – A wide-ranging report commissioned by the federal government has called for "urgent and proactive" system-level reforms to improve the standard of healthcare provided to First Nations people in prison.[1] The report is an indictment on the inhumane treatment of First Nations people in prison and the substandard and not culturally appropriate healthcare being provided to them. It calls on Australian governments to work together to implement large-scale reforms to address this, driven by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and alternative models of custody for First Nations people. The report leads with six high level recommendations at a system-level to address serious concerns identified throughout the review. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/40ElyFH

1. 'The National Review of First Nations Healthcare in Prisons (2023-2024),' Department of Health & Aged Care. **Download report at:** https://bit.ly/4gqz7Qk

The National Review of First Nations Health Care in Prisons…

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & AGED CARE | Online – 6 December 2024 – There are universal challenges within places of detention that impact on prisoners' and people on remand's ability to access quality healthcare services to meet their needs. For First Nations people these challenges are compounded by additional barriers resulting from the systemic racism and harmful attitudes that work to further restrict access to healthcare. Informants to this review reported that First Nations people in places of detention feel that requests for help are more likely to receive a punitive rather than therapeutic response. As the world's

oldest continuous living culture, First Nations people also have deep cultural obligations, connections and ways of knowing and being. **Download report at:** https://bit.ly/4gqz7Qk

Preliminary evaluation of a novel Aboriginal community-controlled prison health service for First Nations people

AUSTRALIAN & NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH | Online – December 2024 – Healthcare in Australian prisons is provided by the health or justice departments or is contracted to a private provider with department oversight. The prison provides an opportunity to address complex health needs in a vulnerable and disadvantaged population that is typically harder to reach... Aboriginal community-controlled organisations can provide high quality, culturally safe health and wellbeing services for First Nations people in prison. The results of this study support the trial of similar community-controlled services in other jurisdictions around Australia, whilst future research may seek to consolidate the evidence base for this novel model of care. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3OlpHcW

The health and wellbeing of First Nations people in Australia's prisons 2022

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF HEALTH & WELFARE IN AUSTRALIA | Online – May 2024 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) people are recognised as the oldest continuous cultures on earth... First Nations people have a holistic concept of health and wellbeing, which is recognised and supported in government policies and services... It is important to understand how the past shapes the lives of First Nations Australians today: they have a long history of trauma, cultural dispossession, and forced displacement and assimilation, which affects their physical, mental and social wellbeing. First Nations people make up a small proportion (3.8%) of the Australian population. Yet they are over-represented in the prison system, making up 32% of the total prison population, and are incarcerated at much higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians... In addition to complex health and wellbeing needs, First Nations people in prison may also require access to culturally safe health care services. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3Xoovvd

Investment and wide-ranging efforts are needed to improve healthcare for First Nations people in prisons

CROAKEY HEALTH MEDIA | Online – 30 May 2024 – Funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services to play a much bigger role in prison healthcare, and the provision of healing programs are critical for First Nations people in prisons, who too often receive sub-standard, poorly coordinated and culturally unsafe healthcare from mainstream services... Indigenous prison health experts also highlighted the need to challenge and rewrite harmful public and policy narratives that contribute to shocking levels of overincarceration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the need to transform services that inflict harm and punishment rather than delivering therapeutic care to those who have experienced racism, violence and trauma. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3XaJ122

Canada

Evaluation of an Indigenous traditional healer and medicine program in a Canadian correctional facility

INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS POLICY JOURNAL | Online – 19 November 2025 – Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women, are over-represented in Canadian prisons. Given the underlined importance and benefits of culturally-based programs for justice-involved Indigenous people, Canada's federal correctional system is committed to providing culturally appropriate programs and practices to meet the needs of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in custody. Healthcare is one area the federal correctional system is committed to incorporating such programs and practices. This study evaluated the delivery and preliminary outcomes of a culturally-based health program implemented at a women's healing lodge … which is centred on the provision of traditional medicine and healing practices. Discussion considers policy implications, the potential for implementing similar culturally-based health interventions at other (federal) correctional facilities… **Full text (click on pdf icon):** https://bit.ly/4pu7Z7D

Healing lodges: A path to rehabilitation and reconnection

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA | Online – 27 September 2024 – Healing lodges are a vital component of Canada's correctional landscape. As part of the broader effort toward truth and reconciliation, the lodges prioritize healing, community, and respect for Indigenous culture. At the heart of the philosophy around healing lodges is the belief that understanding one's identity and cultural heritage can lead to meaningful change. The lodge's environment, which includes regular sweat lodge ceremonies and the harvesting of traditional Indigenous medicines, aims to create a sense of respect and responsibility. There are 10 healing lodges across Canada, four of them are run solely by Correctional Service Canada, while others are managed by partner or community organizations. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/4eldE4B

Overincarceration of Indigenous people: A health crisis

CANADIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION JOURNAL, 2019;191(18):487-488. Indigenous people are incarcerated at a much higher rate in Canada than the general population.[1] It is well known that incarceration is a negative determinant of health. For Indigenous Peoples, the legacy of colonialism and ongoing systemic racism, including in the Canadian justice system, has both immediate and far-reaching negative health impacts, and contributes to health inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. The overincarceration of Indigenous people leads to an inequitable distribution of the health harms of incarceration, as well as an enormous burden of years of life lost attributable to incarceration for Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous men lose 4-6 times more years of life to incarceration than non-Indigenous men, and Indigenous women lose 6-9 times more years of life than non-Indigenous women, across both the federal penitentiary and British Columbia provincial jail systems. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/47Yn4H4

New Zealand

The Voices of Underserved Communities in Palliative Care

HEALTH NEW ZEALAND | Online – 5 November 2024 – Incarcerated people typically have high and complex physical and mental healthcare needs before entering prison. As a result, they experience age related physical deterioration at an earlier age than the general population. Respectful, dignified, and caring palliative care (PC) is possible even in the current context of New Zealand prisons as outlined in a case study of a prisoner in a forensic mental health unit. He had been resident in the unit for 25 years when he was diagnosed with an incurable cancer. The staff worked with him to develop a bucket list. However, as he deteriorated the staff found it difficult to provide the necessary physical care to keep him comfortable. They were not adequately resourced, or trained, to provide PC and eventually the man had to be transferred to the local hospital where he died. **Download report at:** https://bit.ly/48dgptr

Extract:

Due to the on-going impacts of colonisation, Māori make up 53.4% of the prison population. It's terrible for their *whānau* if they can't be there to be with them in their last moments. Just providing better care in prisons won't fix everything because then if they pass away in prison, there's little chance for whānau to be involved.

N.B. *Whānau* is Māori for extended family.

U.S.

Healthcare barriers for incarcerated Indigenous populations in the U.S. prison system

WEITZMAN INSTITUTE | Online – 1 November 2024 – For Indigenous communities, culturally competent care is essential for promoting healthy lives, which can translate to reducing recidivism. While it is difficult to pinpoint what culturally competent care methods should be adopted since Indigenous populations are diverse, it is important for healthcare providers in prisons to be knowledgeable and ask questions to identify what traditional and spiritual practice applies to individuals. Examples of this care can form sweat lodges to traditional teachings. As this group is overrepresented in prisons in the U.S., the need to provide targeted

interventions is necessary to achieve the U.S. vision of prisons as a tool for rehabilitation and successful reintegration. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3YQ2Ex5

The unmet healthcare needs of indigenous people incarcerated in tribal jails

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION | Online – 12 June 2024 – It is imperative that effective and long-lasting healthcare-related policies, programs, structures, and practices are implemented. All solutions must uphold justice, promote health, respect the rights and well-being of people incarcerated on tribal lands, strengthen Native Nations' sovereignty, and incorporate tribal perspectives throughout every step of development. In addition, all possible interventions need to be made with the support of the federal government, financial and otherwise. The federal government, which has suppressed the sovereignty and growth of Native Nations, cannot only provide resources that mirror current structures and systems. **Full text:** https://bit.ly/3z8vuy1

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