

From the Cessnock mines to fighting for Indigenous youth: GP Peter O'Mara's incredible story - Royal Australian College of GPs

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The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) has welcomed the appointment of Peter O'Mara as a Professor of Newcastle University.

The Chair of the RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Faculty, Professor O'Mara is Director of the University's Thuru Indigenous Health Unit and a practicing GP in an Aboriginal community controlled health service.

Professor O'Mara said that becoming a GP was not something he grew up believing was possible.

"I always had a strong interest in science, but in my early years I believed in the stereotypical view that studying and practicing medicine was for other people – doctors' children and wealthy families," Professor O'Mara said.

"After leaving Cessnock High School, I worked in the coal mines as a fitter machinist. I injured my back in an accident and I had to ask myself serious questions, including whether I could continue working in the mines.

"I was watching the Ray Martin Show one day when I saw an interview with one of Australia's first Aboriginal doctors Dr Louis Peachey. It sparked something in me and I thought to myself – why can't that be me?

"So I digested all the information I could. The first Monday after the show aired I took myself down to Newcastle Uni and scooped all the information available, I reckon I read every medicine brochure inside and out, front to back. From that point on there was no looking back, it has been an incredible journey."

A Wiradjuri man raised in the small township of Paxton in the Hunter Valley Region, Professor O'Mara thrives on the opportunity to pass on his wisdom and inspire the next generation of Indigenous healthcare workers.

"I find teaching medical students incredibly rewarding and believe it is vital to provide support for Indigenous students to help them become the best doctors they can be.

"We need more Indigenous doctors. As an Indigenous GP, I understand the life circumstances of Indigenous patients and how important it is to reconnect with country and family. If we can enhance the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healthcare workforce, including in general practice, we can take strong strides forward in 'closing the gap'.

"Communities have such a strong sense of pride in our Indigenous doctors. We have made progress but there is so much more to be done in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health outcomes.

"My message to Indigenous people is that if you are considering studying medicine, then give it a red hot go and see if it suits you. If not, no problem, but you might surprise yourself and thrive in ways you never thought possible."

Professor O'Mara is also continuing the fight on issues of great significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"Every day is a new opportunity to advocate and push for positive change in communities across Australia. I am part of the national campaign to raise the age of criminal responsibility in Australia and it's something that I am really passionate about," Professor O'Mara said.

“Let this sink in - right now children as young as 10 years old can be arrested, thrown in a police cell and then incarcerated in prison-like settings. It’s just unacceptable and as Chair of the RACGP Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Faculty I am not going to take a backwards step in getting the age raised to 14.

“We know that incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is disproportionate to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and much higher when compared with the non-Indigenous population. This has to change and we have not got a moment to lose.

“Lifelong health and wellbeing begins in childhood and the sustained criminalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will create a cycle of vulnerability and engagement with the justice system for generations to come.

“As a GP I’m pushing for therapeutic alternatives that support prevention and early intervention activities that are culturally safe.

“We also call for a strong investment in tackling the social determinants of health. Throwing children in prison-like conditions will set these people on a destructive life course and get us absolutely nowhere.”

The national Raise the Age campaign has been established to lobby all state, territory and Commonwealth governments to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Australia to 14. This issue disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who made up more than 60% of the 600 children aged 10 to 13 in detention from 2018-19.

More information is available at: <https://www.raisetheage.org.au/>

~ENDS

Professor O’Mara is available for interview.

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