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TRANSCRIPT

Interview: The Healing Foundation CEO Fiona Cornforth with Dan Bouchier, ABC Radio 666 Canberra 'Afternoons', Thursday 15 April 2021

Topics: Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 30-year anniversary; intergenerational healing

DAN BOURCHIER: And today is the 30th anniversary since the royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody, which was seen as a landmark point where the nation said we can no longer accept what is happening in prisons and the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

That came after the deaths of 99 Indigenous people in prisons, and there was a real wave of a sentiment for change in the late 80s. Thirty years on, we've seen reports in recent years that say more than a third of those recommendations, the 339 of them, still haven't been completely fulfilled, begging the question of why? And what has gone so wrong in the system to get to this point, where three decades on, the volume of people- the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prisons - has doubled and that there have been at least 450 deaths in that time, likely more than 470 and that last month alone, in March 2021, there were at least five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who died?

To make sense or to try and make sense of this is the Chief Executive of the Healing Foundation, Fiona Cornforth who's with me this afternoon. Yaama, g'day.

FIONA CORNFORTH: Hi, Dan.

DAN BOURCHIER: Good to have you here. What do you ... how do you reflect on this today?

FIONA CORNFORTH: Yeah, look, it is an important time to do that reflecting. Though it's something we carry every day, I think, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Unfortunately, we're at a point now where we've lost hope in recommendations being fully implemented, despite all our voices being in these reports over time and people being generous and courageous to put forward their stories, time and time again. Where the solutions are in community, the solutions are given up as important by those with lived experience. But the powers that be and the complex system, the incarceration system, and all the

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service providers, the big web just can't seem to get these recommendations out of the too hard basket.

DAN BOURCHIER:

There's something utterly demoralising isn't there when you have a report like this that has shone such a powerful spotlight on an issue that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were aware of, but the rest of the country seemed not to be. To then have a litany of reports since that time over the last 30 years and to still have the tremendous unfinished business of actually looking at this and, I don't know, but seemingly actually taking it seriously.

FIONA CORNFORTH:

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we know people have gone through this. That's how the stats are. We have those personal experiences, and a lot of others just don't.

But our story at the Healing Foundation is one led by Stolen Generation survivors, and we know that they're 3.3 times more likely to have been incarcerated in the previous five years - and that's Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data only released in 2018.

And we also know that the reasons that our people are locked up are usually because of being marginalised and powerless, having such social and economic disadvantage, and that's all from policies of colonisation.

And so, what our survivors want to lead is intergenerational healing. And it's such a powerful thing, but we really need people to start listening. Finally, the answers are here. If every system, sector by sector, workforce by for workforce, is trauma-aware and healing-informed, then we're going to do much better as a nation.

DAN BOURCHIER:

I love that concept of intergenerational healing. And you and I have spoken a lot in the past about what is intergenerational trauma, and I hate to ask you again, but just because we constantly have new people that are joining the show...

FIONA CORNFORTH:

Sure.

DAN BOURCHIER:

...Can you just give anyone who's not familiar with it a sense of what is intergenerational trauma?

FIONA CORNFORTH:

What we know is that when people hear that, they think of it as one generation passing on trauma to the next, but what we're clear about is that we're passing on our experiences of trauma and the impact of trauma to the next generation. All human beings experience trauma.

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The origins of our trauma are through colonisation and policies like removal. All that evidence is there now, but ... and so when someone's in trauma - and quite simply, we all know about that fight, flight, or freeze response - it means that our resourcefulness and the opportunities usually open to most people from a place of strength aren't there. It really, it's just a [indistinct] so...

DAN BOURCHIER:

And with your hands there, you were just indicating from an open space to close it. It limits opportunity, doesn't it?

FIONA CORNFORTH:

Well, it does, and you don't have to look far in our families. We know how many people in our families are still afraid of showing up to school, to school systems, because the experiences inform that you're going to have a traumatic experience, and that goes across health settings. And despite all the gains that have been made, we haven't tackled the core issue, which is trauma.

We've looked at symptoms. We've said: let's employ more Aboriginal people because if they've got a greater income, then they're more likely to have better health outcomes and education outcomes.

But they still carry that trauma if you haven't addressed that or dealt with that in any way. And so, trauma being a human thing, means that we are able to recover from trauma, and its positive interaction by positive interaction. But just going back to the deaths in custody in the royal commission, one of the recommendations was that imprisonment should only occur as a last resort.

DAN BOURCHIER:

Not as the first option.

FIONA CORNFORTH:

No. And that would be because we want to look at the trauma and how so-called corrective settings don't address trauma. How can you correct when you're not helping people be their most resourceful selves and be in a place of strength? And something really important about that, Dan, which we've chatted about before, is that our culture gives us strength, our identity gives us strength. We are so lucky and we're here right now as a thriving, surviving culture because we've got elements in our culture that keep us safer and well and they always have. And they always will, we just need more of our systems to privilege that.

DAN BOURCHIER:

And what does that look like, having the systems that allow and facilitate that?

FIONA CORNFORTH:

Yeah, look, it's different in different areas, but that's the point. It's safe spaces to feel that you can go there, you can deal with it, that you won't be further traumatised, that you won't be further harmed.

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That's a process that we've undertaken across the country, holding healing forums, creating safe spaces, allowing that self-determination to happen in every single nation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nation. We need our own people, like I said we've got the solutions. It's bringing them to the fore and allowing them walking alongside our communities as they tell every service provider. They have to interact with what's going to work for them.

DAN BOURCHIER:

I reckon there'll be people listening today who are seeing the news headlines about 30 years and scratching their heads. And when you use that term, Fiona, about 'walking alongside', is that something that everyday people, Canberrans and Australians can do? Is there an ability on that kind of interpersonal level?

FIONA CORNFORTH:

Yeah, absolutely. And a lot of people do do that. But I guess when you're walking alongside, you're seeing, its empathy, you're looking at the world from someone else's point of view, from their point of view- from our point of view. You're taking the time to understand those parts of our culture that work for us. There are no deadlines in our culture. There are no funding terms. But we have governance, we have very sophisticated ways of doing what matters most. And the more we- people work alongside our communities, the more that comes to the fore. But there's got to be safety if that's to happen.

DAN BOURCHIER:

And trust is a big part of that.

FIONA CORNFORTH:

Trust is a big part. And the more we have people interacting with the justice system and getting the raw end of the stick every time, it being a death sentence and the chances being too high of that.

I work closely with service providers here, Aboriginal ones. A lot of our own mob go into AMC and talk to the people, our inmates in there, but they are all suffering from trauma. And many of them cope really well, others want that reconnection with culture, the reconnection with their identity, and our survivors lead that. Because some of our survivors who are removed, they sometimes never get reconnected. So how do they survive? Well, they look at concepts like how we were a thought, we were a cell in our grandmother's bodies. So, we do have that DNA. It's in us whether we like it or not, and all the science backs that up. And that gives those who feel without, a place of strength to stand from and be their most resourceful selves and look at all the opportunities.

DAN BOURCHIER:

You're hearing from Fiona Cornforth, the Healing Foundation CEO. We're talking about the 30th anniversary of the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission. Just for a moment, I want to talk about your own organisation, the Healing Foundation, which of course came out of a

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recommendation of the Bringing Them Home report, I think was the 24th anniversary of which was last week. That's an example of where a recommendation from a landmark report has actually been adopted. What does that show us or what's the lesson from that to policy makers and politicians about how you can lead from a strength base?

FIONA CORNFORTH:

There are so many lessons in it. One of them that I feel has set us up to do the work that we do best is being, having this national mandate. So, the leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychologists in Australia went around to every region in this country and said, what do you want from the Healing Foundation? And that remains our mandate today. Voices from the campfire told us that we need to get all the data together, all the analysis, talk about what's not being done, what should be being done by now and, led by survivors of the Stolen Generations, start this intergenerational healing process.

DAN BOURCHIER:

And when you think about by extension of that, the intergenerational healing when it comes to this report, the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission, what do you want the politicians to hear? And this is not just Federal. This is state and territory as well because that often is one of the pinch points, is that one jurisdiction will say no, no, it's not us, it's the other level. What do you want to say to all of them?

FIONA CORNFORTH:

That's a good question.

DAN BOURCHIER:

I suspect there's a lot that you want to say.

FIONA CORNFORTH:

There's a lot that I want to say, but there's opportunity for systems, like I said sector by sector, workforce by workforce, to understand what their contribution can be to healing each day to fellow Australians. So, we've got a lot of this contemporary trauma to deal with now, like you outlined, or the doubling and the tripling of statistics, what we continue to do as systems, as decision-makers for this country is not working. You've got to see that. There's wasted time, effort, energy and money if we're not tackling the trauma, if we're not focusing on healing.

DAN BOURCHIER:

Yeah, and as such a strong place in point to leave us on, but thank you so very much for coming in. And I know that for you and for me and for so many others, the constantly talking about this is so draining in and of itself. So, I do appreciate it even more, because I know what a toll that takes as well.

FIONA CORNFORTH:

Thanks, Dan. And look, you've been reporting on it for years and years now, so back at you.



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- DAN BOURCHIER: Well, thank you and hopefully it's something that I'm not reporting on and you and I are not talking about again next year, although the realist in me wonders whether that will be true or not. But thank you very much.
- FIONA CORNFORTH: Thank you, Dan.
- DAN BOURCHIER: That is Fiona Cornforth there, The Healing Foundation CEO.

To raise awareness about intergenerational trauma, The Healing Foundation produced this animation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlqx8EYvRbQ&t>

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that partners with communities to heal trauma caused by the widespread and deliberate disruption of populations, cultures and languages over 230 years. This includes specific actions like the forced removal of children from their families.

Media contact: Ben O'Halloran – 0474 499 911 or ben@healingfoundation.org.au