

“Speaking with the voice of our Ancestors” -4

My talk today is about self-determination, because if we cannot determine our own destiny and take our people through to the future in safety, we, as a people will not survive.

Seventy years ago, just after the WWII, my grandfathers, who were great visionary leaders, sat down to talk about our family. They were very concerned for the future of their children, grand -children, and future generations of their children.

More than at any time in history, we need great leadership across Australia in all aspects of our society, but especially we need Indigenous people to have the opportunity to lead our people into safety, with the resources, the means and the tools that are required to do this, otherwise we may not have a safe home for our children.

Two hundred years ago when Gardia (white man), first came to our land, we, the Wumpararni the People, were 100% of us on this land. Today because of the destructive nature of the Gardia with the mindset of colonizers, destroyed our people. Today we, who are remaining, are only 3% on our land.

Today, I demand that the truth be told about my people and our experiences.

Over the past 200 years, our people died because of strategies used by the British colonizers to drive us towards extinction. A major tool used was biological warfare against our people by introducing infectious disease, such as smallpox, to which we had no immunity. We have this knowledge in our minds and saddened hearts as a living memory to us.

Our Grandfathers recognized that the greatest threat to our existence, was not a virus. It was a disease of the soul a disease of greed for power and control. This disease continues today in the hearts and minds of many proud Gardia who refuse to reflect on their own cultural values and how this impacts on ours.

Aboriginal people have been told that we are vulnerable, that we are a sick people, that we will live a short life because we have weak bodies. No! This is not true. As an Larrakia/Wurramungu doctor, I tell my people now, that we have perfect bodies! Our bodies were made perfectly for our country, our home. Our bodies respond perfectly to our environments. But if those environments are poor, by not having appropriate accommodation, good regular nutritious food, water, access to medical and social resources, interaction with families, communities and culture, then our bodies and minds will respond to that poverty in a destroying way. This will make us sick, with diabetes, kidney disease and heart attacks which cause us to die young.

Never believe that we are vulnerable because of our biology and our genetics.

The truth is that we are vulnerable because of colonization. We have been forced and maintained in a state of control by white Australian leaders, and these views have been nurtured and allowed to persist through the past 200 years.

The truth is, that Gardia are still trying to maintain control over us. This is why we don't have equitable resources, food, housing, education and training which will give us the skills, means and knowledge, so that we can look after ourselves.

Today a mother lives in a tin shed in 43 degree heat, caring for her invalid mother who cannot walk without aid, and two young children. They have no electricity, water, toilet, they don't even have a

door for security. They are doing their best to survive. They are not doing well. Indigenous leaders must have the means to create a change for citizens like this mother and her family.

The challenges that we face in overcoming and beating this covid threat and any future threats is that there is a lack of understanding. A cultural gap. This lack of understanding is a major barrier to improving the health and safety of our people, and has been so for the past 200 years.

Gardias are not the expert on Aboriginal issues, we, the Wumpararni are. We must have the opportunity to work together in true and equal partnership to protect not only our people but all Australians, because when the most vulnerable of us is protected, then all of us are protected.

“White Privilege,” discrimination and racism are barriers that prevents growth, health and happiness to all Australians, not just indigenous. But it adversely affects Indigenous Australians.

We have been directed and led by non -Aboriginal people who do not know how to communicate with us. They do not know our protocols, strengths, or our culture. They do not know our people or even know how to speak to us. So how can they help and lead us. They cannot because they do not know how to.

This is why this mother and her family are living like this after so many years of ineffective government leadership. This little family is not going to survive the virus if we don't help her.

There is mistrust from both sides, because of our differing cultures and histories. This has to be addressed now, we must come to an agreement nationally that empowers us, and provides for our rights, view, opinions and ways of doing things to be of equal value.

What we have right now is a national medical emergency. We, our Indigenous people are in a very dangerous position. Our entire nation and the health of our people are at a critical tipping point. If we do not act now to protect our people we, the remaining 3 % will not survive.

This Pandemic has ripped off the bandaids covering the past 50 years of Government interventions, laying bare the vulnerabilities and fragilities of thousands of communities and families around Australia, exposing them to even more danger. These communities are weak, they need to be strengthened and fortified to protect against any threat.

We have appalling substandard housing and accommodation for many of our people. This is ABSOLUTELY NOT conducive to developing good health.

Many of our people regularly go hungry, with access to good nutritious food too expensive for families to afford.

We have inadequate home necessities such as fridges, washing machines, stoves, hot water, these items are essential to maintain good health.

Our communities are not set up for self –isolation, it is not possible to socially distance in houses that accommodate in excess of twenty people.

There are limited or no health services available in some communities, including ability to access doctors via telephone or video consultations.

There is a lack of communication such as access to internet, and mobile phones services.

Most of our people live in poverty. Many of our people rely on government payments and have limited savings if any to fall back on in times of need.

After listening to the advice of our health professionals, the whole of Australia was placed on “lockdowns”. These consisted of regional “bubbles” that could not be crossed until it was safe to do so. People could not go into or out of the “bubbles” without permission and quarantining for two weeks some of these lockdowns lasted for months. We could not even fish or hunt.

Because of the lockdowns, distance, and financial barriers to services, our people were not able to access specialist and surgical consultations and procedures. This has an enormous flow on effect. People with illness get worse, they are unable to work, home finances become more strained and home relationships and families suffer with domestic violence, physical and mental health issues not just for the parents but also for the children.

Access to culturally appropriate mental health services are lacking in towns and communities, especially in regional and remote Australia.

During our most crucial times, there was confusion due to multiple inconsistent messages which we converted into meaningful messages that our people could understand

Domestic violence increased within lockdowns. There was anxiety, fear and not enough resources already in place, to protect our women and children from aggressors. We did not have enough shelters to run to. Unplanned pregnancies increased, as did sexually transmitted infections especially in teenagers. Expectant mothers were not willing, to go to hospitals to deliver their babies for fear of contracting the disease and endangering themselves, babies and families.

Police and Defense road blocks did not stop people such as alcohol and drug runners, travelling from one community to another, risking transmission. There is not nearly enough supports in place to help people overcome their addictions.

Poor literacy has led to misunderstanding of government messages, access to informational resources, employment opportunities, and pathways out of poverty.

Many of our children do not have the resources that is needed to grow healthy strong bodies and minds. To have the education they will need to get themselves out of poverty.

The last place where some of our people can retreat and isolate to are our homelands and outstations. However, with the lack of infrastructure, such as adequate housing, solar panels, bores, water tanks, sewage, generators and means of communication such as short wave radios, prevented people being able to go to their safe places, and increased the risk for transmission in communities and towns, because they had nowhere else to go to.

Not all of our people have homelands to retreat to. They are also vulnerable with limited culturally appropriate resources, supports, and the tools needed to survive, even in the cities.

Cultural ignorance and incompetence by non -Indigenous workers including health professionals, who lacked knowledge and understanding of our culture, protocols, ceremonies, and traditions were not only not helpful, but often a barrier, literally endangering our people’s lives.

The strength and resilience of our culture lies in the very deep love that we have for our people. We are a social people, we cannot exist without each other. Across Australia, all tribes united at all levels to protect and defend our people. All groups working in their specialist areas fighting together against a common threat to our people.

Some of strategies used to protect our people were:

1. We activated and started preparations at least one month before the virus even came to Australia, because we saw the danger. We knew what had to be done and we started to prepare.
2. We started preparation of our people at the family, community, regional, state and national levels
3. Many families called family meeting. Some families used internet to create chat groups to keep connected and up -to -date on Covid issues. Many made Emergency Action Plans, and family preparedness became a priority across this nation.
4. Our doctors gave and we listened to the early advice of Health professionals for “best practice” in protecting people from pandemics.
5. In the Northern Territory we closed the borders of our lands to all non –Aboriginal people and restricted access to only emergency service workers. The NLC directed this process after listening to the advice of health professionals. They worked together as true partners with genuine concern for all of our citizens. Northern Territory Government recognized us equals in decision making processes. It was through this collaboration which led to the NT biosecurity Legislation, and for the Northern Territory to close its borders to the rest of Australia to protect our citizens.

We have not had even one case of community acquired transmission in the NT.

6. The Larrakia Nation in collaboration with the NTG provided assistance to over 1700 homeless people in Darwin to get them safely back to their communities.

The communities became our Arcs. We had to protect them at all costs.

They also prepared stockpiles and warehouses full of food, and prepared to unlock saved money to be used to buy food for our people, for all of our people on Larrakia lands, both Wumpararni and gardia.

7. I personally educated over 1250 indigenous and non-indigenous prisoners, and advocated for their release to their communities, if they were safe to do so, to prevent further deaths in custody.
8. Aboriginal Medical Services throughout Australia, worked tirelessly preparing to protect our people in many ways such as producing educational pamphlets specifically written in the local language such as Warramunga and interpreters sat with the people educating them. Others developed culturally appropriate educational videos in the local languages such as Yolgu Matha.
Some renovated a room in their small clinics to enable safe covid testing to be done. Another organization kept connected to their community and patients by organizing online activities via their own facebook page such as meditation, and basket-weaving
Another set up a respiratory testing site away from their clinic but in their town
While yet another prepared boxes of food with games for children for over 70 needy families.

- 11 The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, (AIDA) formed regular meeting nationwide to receive, address and notify national health leaders of the issues of concern reported by Indigenous Doctors.

A National Covid-19 Taskforce, which consisted of representatives from Peak Indigenous Health bodies, and the Federal Government produced a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander document specifically to be used as a guide around Australia, to inform our people and especially for Aboriginal Health services to better assist and protect our people.

AIDA lobbied against racism in the health system. They also created and circulated regular short educational videos made by indigenous doctors to our people. These doctors are known and trusted by our people, and the people followed their advice.

- 11 The Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS) across Australia was led by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations which guided state affiliates such as AMSANT and VACHO, then down to regional AMS such as Anyinginyi, Wutherong and Mamu who then developed pandemic plans for the peoples in their areas.

To date there have been no Indigenous deaths in Australia from COVID-19

I believe that the reason why, is due to the strength of our culture, the love for our people and the resilience instilled within us by all of our grandfathers. We now have to become like those great visionary leaders of the past, our ancestors. We have to protect our people now and guide them safely into the future and we DEMAND to have the tools to be able to do so.

We have to prepare well now, and we have to do it quickly.