

Good morning everybody.

My name is Agnes Shea, and I am one of the Ngunnawal elders.

I would like to welcome you to Ngunnawal Country, the land of my ancestors and my children.

I would like to thank the Conference organisers for inviting me here today and acknowledge:

- the Honourable Justice Richard Refshauge from the ACT Supreme Court
- representatives from ACT Health
- the Department of Health and Ageing
- and everyone who has travelled from all parts of Australia and New Zealand

I want to also acknowledge the Aborigine and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

It is an honour to welcome everyone to our national capital.

I would now like to explain the meaning of the Welcome to Country. The tradition of welcoming people is a cultural practice that was handed down by our old people from the beginning of time.

What it means is that before entering another person's country you would always announce your arrival and not enter until a traditional owner of that country welcomed you.

The reason for this practice was to protect your spirit while you were in another person's country, but also to show respect for the country you were entering.

As a Ngunnawal elder, I'm very proud when non-Indigenous organisations ask an elder to come to do a Welcome to Country. Because it shows recognition and respect for our traditional culture and this can truly help towards building reconciliation.

This Annual Conference is organised by the Therapeutic Communities Association or in short, the ATCA.

The ATCA works with young people, adults and families who have problems with the misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

This is a huge problem for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people all over Australia. In Canberra we have seen an increase in the use of illegal drugs and the misuse of alcohol for a long time.

The misuse of illegal drugs and alcohol has destroyed too many of my people, their families and their communities. Violence, crime and ill health are often the result of drug and alcohol misuse.

It has caused the breakdown of many of our families and communities.

In the Canberra community, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include the Ngunnawal people and many others who have come here to work from other states and territories. Although this is the nation's capital, our people in Canberra still have poor health compared to the non-Indigenous people living here.

When we look at the problems that drug and alcohol misuse has caused, we, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, look at the whole person – their mind, their body and their spirit.

Treating drug and alcohol misuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is a big challenge. Loss of land, culture, language and the Stolen Generations have caused a lot of pain and grief in our communities.

So it is important that there is a choice of treatment programs and services, so people can find the one that is best for them, because “one size doesn't fit all”.

I can say that I have been working for a long time to make a change in my community. I am on an Advisory Board to ACT Health and we are working to establish a Residential Rehabilitation Service – Bush Healing farm for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here in the ACT.

The ACT Government has supported this very important and much needed service. It is now important for our community to make sure that it happens and we can then help to make a change for the future.

Enjoy your time in Canberra this week. As you may know, the word Canberra means “meeting place”, so you have chosen the right place to come and share your stories, to learn from each other and to come up with new ideas in working with people with substance use problems.

Now I'd like to finish by saying the words of the Ngunnawal people (in own language) which means;

“You may leave your footprints on our land now, or, in other words, again, Welcome to Ngunnawal Country”.

Thank you, and good morning.