

THE AUSTRALIAN

A focus on culture does little to address mental health needs

ANTHONY DILLON THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 26, 2013 12:00AM

TOM Calma and Pat Dudgeon are to be congratulated for their article in Inquirer last week about the need to address the mental health gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

These distinguished Australians have spoken much about mental health over the years and in recent times, particularly on the alarming rates of suicide among Aboriginal people - a major concern for all Australians.

Addressing mental health issues for Aboriginal people is a complex puzzle, and no one person has all the pieces. I am simply adding some more.

Early in last week's article, reference was made to "our own mental health strategies, within our terms of cultural reference and understandings of mental health". Such phrases can imply that Aboriginal people have a need for services different from that of other Australians.

Later they refer to Aboriginal Australians, describing their mental and physical health in terms of connections to "traditional lands" and a "spiritual dimension of existence".

While such ideas may please those who embrace a romanticised view of Aboriginal culture, the majority of Australians indentifying as Aboriginal are very similar to Calma, Dudgeon and myself. That is, while having some Aboriginal ancestry, many are virtually indistinguishable from non-Aboriginal Australians in how they think and act.

Most importantly, they have the same fundamental needs and aspirations as other Australians.

An over-emphasis on cultural differences, while arguably justified in the past, does very little to address need in the 21st century. Indeed, it often creates need, whereby Aboriginal Australians are encouraged to see themselves as having different needs, which only other Aboriginal Australians are said to be able to address. Emphasising culture then becomes a barrier. To use the words of Australia's first Aboriginal head of a government, Northern Territory Chief Minister Adam Giles, the left-elitist mindset that puts a protection model over Aboriginal culture to keep people in a museum, is holding them back.

The majority of Aboriginal Australians live in urbanised settings. For those who live in remote Aboriginal lands (approximately 75,000), it is worthwhile exploring if their needs, cultural or otherwise, are different from those of other Aboriginal Australians. Though their physical and social environments may be different from those living in urban settings, the precursors to sound mental health are the same as those of other Australians. This should not be surprising, as Aboriginal people are people first and Aboriginal second.

The foundation to sound mental health is robust self-esteem. On the same page in last week's Inquirer, Alan Tudge wrote, "The self-esteem and empowerment that comes with regular employment is the only viable foundation for a strong Aboriginal community and equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians."

Jobs are crucial. The most striking difference between the remote and the urbanised Aboriginal person relates to their job-readiness (education and skill levels) and access to jobs.

In remote communities the jobs are less plentiful and the people often unequipped in terms of skills to perform those jobs that are available. And without sufficiently high numbers of employed people within a community, hope diminishes, and boredom and despair set in, with dysfunction typically following.

Our self-esteem grows in accordance with the contributions we make to others and the society we live in. This is a fundamental trait shared by all races. In our 21st-century world, paid employment is one of the most efficient ways of contributing to society, and hence achieving high self-esteem.

Being employed has obvious economic, social and emotional benefits to individuals and their communities. All of this motivates people to embrace a future, which, as Calma and Dudgeon point out, is a strong disincentive to suicide. Employment and economic development should therefore be a leading priority when addressing the mental health needs of people.

The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Australians is everyone's business.

Calma and Dudgeon make the reasonable request for "Australian governments to support Aboriginal Australians" in order to address the mental health gap. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that Aboriginal people are not given the message that government is solely responsible for their wellbeing. On this matter, Tudge's advice should be noted: "It requires government commitment and sound policy, but in concert with efforts of business and Aboriginal people themselves".

The role and initiative of Aboriginal people themselves is too often downplayed, but is absolutely crucial if gaps are to be closed.

Anthony Dillon is an academic at the University of Western Sydney and identifies as a part-Aboriginal Australian.