

Connie's conference catch-up: Highlights from the Public Health Australia Conference 2026

G'day TIS teams!

In September, I flew down to the beautiful lands of the Wadawurrung People of the Kulin Nation for the PHAA Public Health Conference. With the theme Transforming Healthier Futures: Systems, Solutions and Solidarity, there was plenty of talk about what shapes health and how we can create healthier futures.

I came away with some interesting insights relevant to TIS work. A strong message across the conference was that preventing tobacco and vaping use means looking beyond individual choices to the commercial, digital and social environments that influence behaviour.

Illicit tobacco and commercial influences



Professor Becky Freeman (University of Sydney) highlighted how commercial interests continue to undermine tobacco control. She challenged the argument that reducing tobacco taxes will solve Australia's illicit tobacco problem, noting that in Canada, lowering tobacco prices did not eliminate the illicit market. Her three wishes for tackling the problem?

- Address the supply chain
- Make quitting cheaper than smoking
- Bring back mass-reach health harms advertising.

The influence of commercial interests was also a theme in a review of 94 Australian public health policies. Only 18 (19%) recognised how commercial factors shape health. The review also warned against 'lifestyle drift' – focusing on changing individual behaviour rather than addressing the wider factors that influence health.

For TIS, this reinforces the importance of addressing these wider influences while keeping community decision-making and control central.

Young people, vaping and digital environments

A survey of 131 school staff found that although most had delivered vaping prevention activities, there were gaps in providing brief advice and connecting students who vape with cessation support.

Presentations on youth and digital health also caught my attention. A Deakin research team used a digital 'scanner' to explore what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people encounter online. While tobacco marketing was relatively uncommon compared to other unhealthy products, there were still examples of the use of nostalgia and humour to engage youth.



For TIS, these findings highlight the importance of linking prevention with appropriate support for young people who vape, and understanding what young people are seeing and engaging with in digital spaces.

Key Takeaways

- **Look beyond individual behaviour:** address the commercial and social factors shaping tobacco and vape use.
- **Keep pace with change**: understand new nicotine products, settings and influences.
- **Keep communities at the centre**: value local leadership, relationships, identity and culture.
- **Build the evidence:** understand what works in practice and what can be sustained.

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New challenges and opportunities

A review of 11 studies on nicotine use in amateur sport challenged the idea that sport is always protective against nicotine use. Peer culture, social identity and beliefs that newer nicotine products can improve performance or manage pain were among the reasons for use.



For TIS, sporting settings offer opportunities to engage young people and promote nicotine prevention.

Artificial intelligence (AI) was another topic that caught my attention. Presenters highlighted its potential to support public health work and extend workforce capacity, while warning that it can reinforce existing inequalities and stereotypes.

For TIS, AI may offer new ways to support our workforce and strengthen evidence-informed practice, but should complement the relationships at the heart of our work

Identity, culture and connection

One message that resonated across several presentations was the importance of identity, heritage and cultural knowledge in building trust and strengthening community engagement.

These are not additional considerations to be fitted into health promotion activities. They are fundamental to how effective work is developed and delivered.

For TIS, this reinforces the importance of protecting and building on the Indigenous leadership, community ownership and cultural foundations of the program.



Celebrating Indigenous excellence!

The conference celebrated two outstanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public health leaders.

Congratulations to **Fiona Cornforth,** recipient of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Award, and **Professor Ray Lovett,** recipient of the Sidney Sax Public Health Award.



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