

"The role of the multicultural sector in health services"

**A Speech by Sam Afra
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DHS Cultural Diversity Forum
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Good morning. It's a pleasure to join you this morning for this special DHS Cultural Diversity Forum and hear the Ministers' assurance of the Victorian Government's commitment to cultural diversity.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the original custodians of the land where we gather, and paying my respects to Joy Wandin-Murphy, and any other elders who may be present.

I'd also like to thank our event partners: the Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) for their assistance in organising today's forum. As the peak body representing ethnic and multicultural communities in Victoria and key liaison point with government, ECCV believes it is essential that the free-flow of ideas between service bodies, decision makers and the public be as frequent and far-reaching as practicable.

On that note, I'd like to thank each of the Ministers for taking the time to join us today and show such an active interest in issues regarding community service delivery to culturally diverse communities.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to add a special word of congratulations to George Lekakis and his team at the Victorian Multicultural Commission who are celebrating 25 years of dedicated service to Victoria's multicultural community. I had the pleasure of attending the VMC's annual Multicultural Gala Dinner hosted by the Premier last Saturday night – the feature event of Cultural Diversity Week – which was a wonderful event as always.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Cultural Diversity Week is one of my favourite times of the year. The smorgasbord of different activities, exhibitions, workshops, and public forums is a timely reminder that as Victorians, we truly are blessed by choice. By way of a neat plug, I should note that the ECCV has joined forces with some of the local community organisations in Carlton to host an array of family-oriented activities later this afternoon on the grounds of the Carlton Housing Estate.

If there's one thing that never fails to impress me about the Week over the past few years, it is the remarkable grass-roots involvement and leadership shown by Victoria's many ethno-specific community organisations. I know too, that many of these organisations in the multicultural community sector are very eager to see their unique knowledge utilised further in the form of ongoing working partnerships with departments such as DHS.

The advantages offered by these community organisations are obvious. Closeness to the community – both in terms of physical proximity, and extended cultural, communal, and familial bonds – is the most obvious, but it is by no means the only one. Optimal bi-lingual and multi-lingual ability is another key advantage, particularly in the sometimes tricky task of distinguishing between regional or unusual dialects.

By their very nature, community organisations in the multicultural sector also embody the very essence of social justice in spirit and deed. Each and every day their staff – many of whom donate their time voluntarily – work at the coalface of social disadvantage and isolation, dedicating themselves to redressing serious inequities in the ease of access to suitable and culturally-sensitive community services and social networks. In most cases, you would be hard-pressed to find a collection of individuals more attuned to the unique needs of their particular community, more trusted

and respected by those need, and more committed to finding solutions that are immediate, effective and sustainable.

We should also continue to explore and strengthen ways of leveraging the unique position and knowledge of these community bodies to improve the standard of social services? When we see statistics like the lower than average use of aged care services by older Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, despite the fact that Australia's population is ageing and at the same time, increasing in its cultural and linguistic diversity, we know there is always more work to be done. The lower than average admission into drug treatment services for people– from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, despite consistent reports (include some by DHS) that reveal that all culturally and linguistically diverse communities identify drugs and alcohol as a problem, is also a concern.

Clearly, the issue is not one of a lower need for such services by either of these segments, but one of barriers – both real and perceived – encountered by the client based on a host of language and cultural factors, some relatively straight-forward, others unique and complex. Whatever the reason, it is just another indication of a rethink on the current strictures regarding service provision by ethno-specific agencies. Not to mention, the fact that many mainstream service providers continue to turn to ethno-specific agencies for advice on how to deliver culturally appropriate care because they lack the necessary expertise themselves.

I should stress at this point, that these points are not made to pre-empt a long-winded, indictment of the current system of service delivery to CALD communities. They are made because I believe effective changes cannot be made without first confronting areas where deficiencies and inefficiencies prevent us from serving Victorians from culturally diverse backgrounds as well as all of us would like. Where the intention to “do good” is not being matched by day-to-day outcomes, something urgently needs to be done.

Not do I overlook some excellent social service initiatives that have been introduced to assist Victorians from diverse backgrounds. Indeed, some, like the recently launched *Wise Choices: Safe Children DVD*, produced by the Child Safety Commissioner deserve as much commendation and broad exposure as we can provide. Available in eight languages including: Dinka, Farsi, Somali, Arabic, Mandarin, Cantonese and Vietnamese; the DVD gives parents the advice they need to protect children from physical, emotional or sexual harm. The DVD and accompanying fact sheets were developed in consultation with child care experts and representatives of Victoria's ethnic communities and represent a vital resource to parents from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Of course, ethno-specific organisations have been producing their own translated materials across a whole range of social concerns – often without any form of sizable government support – for the benefit of their respective communities for years. Yet, sometimes, a fixed mindset persists in many halls of government that ethno-specific bodies lack the capability to serve as a viable alternative or supplement to existing government providers in such activities. This frequent reluctance to give a leading role to ethno-specific service providers is not founded on some long-standing precedent.

Ethno-specific organisations already do provide service delivery in one of the most vital areas of life – residential aged care beds for older Victorians. Each of the top ten older ethnic communities in Victoria : Italian ... Greek ... German ... Polish ... Cantonese ... Dutch ... Maltese ... Croatian ... Macedonian ... and Vietnamese ... all have ethno-specific agencies providing residential care through the Commonwealth Government's RESI-CARE program. Not only that, JewishCare provides a range of services which come under the State Government umbrella of HACC BASIC services such as domestic assistance, personal care, property maintenance, meals on wheels, and assessment and care management. Italian agency CO.AS.IT also provides limited assessment services to Victorians of Italian background.

So ethno-specific agencies are already doing the job. They just want the chance to do more for their communities.

From a broader policy standpoint, there is definitely room for greater clarity and consistency across the various levels of government about the role ethno-specific service providers are expected to fulfil. Particularly in relation to mainstream service providers and also bodies such as Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs).

In speaking of MRCs, I am well aware that for representative bodies of our state's many smaller ethnic communities, there are definite advantages to be had in clustering advisory and advocacy services together in one all-purpose shopfront. On the other hand, I'm sure I don't need to go into great detail about all the areas where ethno-specific service providers can add value and offer choice to the user. The few I have already mentioned such as Aged Care, and Drug and Alcohol Services are worth reiterating.

In terms of servicing the ageing, we all know by now that the numbers of senior Victorians from culturally diverse backgrounds is growing all the time. We've all seen the predictions. That according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) by 2011, one in every five people aged 80 or over, will be from a CALD background, a ratio that is estimated to increase to one in every four people by 2026. We all know the changing demographics of our CALD older population present some very real challenges for our aged care service system.

Countless reports tell us that barriers to older ethnic people in accessing mainstream health and community services include language difficulties, cultural differences, and a lack of understanding of systems. We know too that healthcare language services budgets are always overstretched, and that a huge injection of funding is needed from Treasury if demand is to be met.

Even when the opportunity to utilise interpreters and translators exists, there is often a level of personal embarrassment and discomfort – and indeed, some strictly-held cultural constraints – about sharing intimate details that dissuades their use. Any good doctor will attest that accuracy of diagnosis and treatment depends on the patient feeling comfortable and confident enough to be open and honest about every aspect of their particular condition. So much so, that where communication between clinician and client is inadequate, the probability of diagnostic and treatment errors is increased.

The cumulative economic cost of misdiagnosis and late intervention cannot be overlooked either.

In short, if incomplete or imprecise communication heightens the chances of under-estimating, over-estimating or misdiagnosing; and if a sense of unfamiliarity, discomfort or embarrassment heightens the chances of incomplete or imprecise communication; then it follows, we should be doing more to dispel those feelings of unfamiliarity, discomfort and embarrassment. Feelings that are nowhere near as pronounced or prevalent among ethno-specific service providers. Where a modicum of familiarity feeds content.

This personal confidence goes beyond simple healthcare for aged Victorians from CALD backgrounds. The huge popularity of social support activities by ethnic seniors in the HACC program indicates that multicultural seniors value group activities highly and are more likely to participate more fully, particularly when they can be done with people from familiar backgrounds.

I also made mention of Drug and Alcohol services for ethnic communities. As stated earlier, many of the same reasons why older Victorians from CALD backgrounds shy away from mainstream service providers, also apply here. Right now – whether it be through ethno-specific agencies or Migrant Resource Centres – there is an immediate need for far greater resourcing of staff suitably trained to handle the situations that arise around drug and alcohol abuse, and suitably attuned to the cultural sensitivities that apply in the case of certain ethnic communities. Once again though, ethno-specific

organisations are – by their nature – better positioned – and often better equipped through language and cultural understanding – to reach people with drug and alcohol problems more effectively.

Similar advantages apply in any health promotion campaign, whether it be warnings about cancer or the dangers of childhood obesity, dental hygiene or the need for flu inoculations, prevention is always the best cure. The more trusted the source of information, the more likely the message will get through and appropriate action be taken.

There are innumerable practical reasons for investigating a more substantial role for ethno-specific agencies in service provision, but there is a considerable moral imperative as well. Each year the Victorian Ombudsman releases a report into incidences where the standard of service in the health and community sector has fallen below expectations. Incidents involving cultural insensitivity or outright racial or religious discrimination (as we saw recently in an alleged encounter involving staff from this very organisation, which I'm sure is not commonplace).

Even when these occurrences are aberrations, any occurrence is one too many, and the implications from such incidents is severe. Research by VicHealth has found that discrimination has negative health consequences for migrant communities in Australia. I would argue that any measure that serves to reduce negative health consequences, rather than increase them should be given the strongest consideration.

Furthermore, the multicultural sector – indeed, our entire democracy here in Australia – is founded on the availability of individual choice. Just as we take pride in the many choices of ethnic, cultural and religious activity on show during Cultural Diversity Week, we should be able to take pride in the variety of social service opportunities available to Victorians. To avail them with the choice, where practicable, of a number of different service options which might better suit their needs.

For all the talk of economic downturns and international monetary crises, Australia is still a nation blessed with riches that can afford a standard of living to everyone of us that would be the envy of millions around the globe. We find ourselves in a time when many Australians are feeling re-invigorated about the future of this great country, eager to play their part and participate in a more productive and responsive form of civic engagement. It is an admirable sentiment – and as I have highlighted today – one that can pay big dividends if supported and nurtured appropriately.

We all remember the immortal line from John F Kennedy's inauguration speech:

ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN DO FOR YOU.
ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY.

I was interested to read the other day that that line has been given a make-over, revised and updated in the spirit of increasing civic engagement that is sweeping the world right now. They are words that inspire so many in the community sector to roll up their sleeves everyday and help out their fellow Victorians as much as possible. Where we ...

ASK NOT WHAT OUR GOVERNMENT CAN DO FOR US,
BUT WHAT WE CAN DO FOR OURSELVES.

I've always thought the goal of a democratic government was to do all it can ... to empower the people – especially migrants who for generations have formed the backbone of this great nation; and provide them with the freedoms and the choices that enable them to maximise their potential, and fulfil their ambitions for the good of all. We should continue to think about whether there are ways government can do more to help them in these worthwhile endeavours. We would like to see a fairer system and improved access and equity to migrants and refugees in the country we call in books 'Australia', but in our hearts we call home.

Thank you.