



A Conversation About... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Climate Change and Covid 19 – Part 1

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Host (00:01):

Hi there. Welcome to Mental Health Professionals' Network podcast series. MHPN aims to promote and celebrate interdisciplinary collaborative mental healthcare.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (00:18):

Before we start, I would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Elders past, present, and emerging. We are a diverse and rich group across this big country, and I'd like to acknowledge all the people, all the different countries, and all the different lands that people might be listening to this podcast from. I'd like to acknowledge our continuing resilience and our continuing culture that gets stronger each year. We come from the past and we walk into the future. So without further ado, just a little bit about me.

My name's Pat Dudgeon and I work and live on beautiful Nyoongar Country, and that's in Perth and Western Australia. And my people are actually the Bardi people of the Kimberley area. And I'll go a little bit more into my professional background that's relevant for this podcast. But before I do that, I'd like to acknowledge my two colleagues, Dr. Stewie Sutherland, and Professor Alan Rosen. And we've had a lot of contact over the years and it's really delightful that we've come together about a very important issue. And I'll speak a bit more about the outline of the series of podcasts. But without further ado, I'd like to introduce Stewie Sutherland to share a little bit about himself.

Dr. Stewart Sutherland (01:40):

Thanks, Pat. I'm Stewart Sutherland. I'm a Wiradjuri man living on Wiradjuri Country. I started my academic career not that long ago, but my professional career in mental health goes back nearly 25 years now. And I've been lucky enough to work with Professor Dudgeon for many years now. Back when I was working for the Department of Health and Ageing in the ATSI division, and for a few years now I've



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known professor Alan Rosen. And we've been working around not only mental health, but environment and its influence on mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (02:19):

Thank you, Stewie. So, Alan, would you like to say a few words about yourself?

Prof. Alan Rosen (02:24):

Well, thanks, Pat. This is a really tough subject. There's lots of light starting to come in, in respect to it, but also its apart from the toughness of the subject, it's a delight to be doing this with, with Pat and Stewart. I'm a community psychiatrist. I've worked both academically and clinically in community psychiatry practice in Sydney and in far west of New South Wales for going on nearly 40 years. I've been in touch with Pat over the years, first of all over her suicide prevention project, and around trying to get the mental health professions to do an apology to all Aboriginal people and worldwide, all the professions to all Indigenous people for what the psychiatric professions have been complicit in in the past and sometimes in the present. And we've also been working together on issues around the impact of climate change and the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Indigenous people to the solutions around climate change. And that's what we're talking about today.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (03:26):

Okay. So, over the four podcasts that we'll be doing as part of this series, we'll be talking about the strengths and priorities particularly of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander communities to the impacts of climate change and the pandemic. Each episode will feature all of us, but each of the four podcasts will take a different focus. In today's podcast, what we are wanting to talk about is just a bit of an overview, I suppose, in what we will be speaking about in some detail later on, but a bit of an introduction, you know, what's happening, you know, what was it like for Aboriginal people prior to colonisation and what other climate changes gonna impact on all of us, but what specific impacts will there be for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? And we thought that it is a bleak topic. It is overwhelming. So there are glimmers of light, though there's glimmers of hope and positivity. Alan actually put it, renewed shoots of hope. So, Alan, do you wanna talk a little bit about that before we go into the history of Indigenous people?

Prof. Alan Rosen (04:35):

Yeah. Okay. So the, the issue about making sure that we look at some of the sources of hope is consistent with the idea that Pat's been teaching me over the years too, about the importance of looking at what we do here in this topic, and particularly working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from a strengths perspective and looking at not just the hope, but where are the contributions and, and where are the visions and practical solutions that are coming now from Indigenous people's worldwide and particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And we will be alluding to some of the evidence for those over this time. The actual concept of lattermath, it's a mediaeval concept. There was a term about aftermath, great regional or global disasters and how people coped with those. And first of all, how they survived them, how they recoiled from 'em, how they recuperated from them. They included wars and famines and, and floods and, and droughts and fires. And just like in a fire when the, the new shoots start coming out, there was another term from mediaeval times called not just aftermath, but latter math, the latter math of the new shoots coming



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and New Hope emerging. And it's in that spirit that we're going to allude to that in everything we talk about. But there will be a session on the details of that in the last of these podcasts.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (06:02):

Thanks, Alan. Thank you for sharing that. I'll talk a little bit later about how land or Country was very much part of Indigenous wellbeing, but the connection and that's what we'll be discussing as well, is that our respective disciplines can't stand aside. We are a part of this society. We're a part of the great social movements that are happening, whether it be a social justice movement such as Black Lives Matter, whether it's doing the apology as Alan referred to the Australian Psychological Society did a formal apology to Indigenous people. And that is starting to happen. There's been this acknowledgement of the past and very oppressive activities that happen as part of colonisation. Not all societies have stepped up to the plate, but certainly we're seeing glimmers of taking responsibility. And I think society has changed a lot, but other very terrible things have come forward.

(07:01):

And one of them is climate change. And we know this, that historically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in harmony with their country with nature. So part of the colonising process for us has not only been, you know, the dispossession from land removal into missions and reserves, active assimilation policies, which, you know, were meant to destroy our culture. And the fact that we have survived and our reclaiming culture is an amazing thing actually. But for at least 60,000 years, Aboriginal people lived in Australia and very little was changed. So, they lived very much in harmony with the Country. I think the only from the archaeological record Aboriginal people did see the end of the Ice age, the impact on the Country, on nature was very minimal. There is a story that I'd heard and from my readings about the Megafauna that roamed Australia, and I was led to believe that it was Aboriginal people who had hunted the Megafauna out. But Stewie has another very interesting take on that Stewie, are you happy to share that?

Dr. Stewart Sutherland (08:16):

Yeah. Look, 60,000 years of occupation in this country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people megafauna and ice ages, and it's now being discussed that the dying out Megafauna was actually a consequence of climate change. The Australia went from being a cold, arid country to a hot, arid country, and the Megafauna weren't designed to take such a shift in the climate and such a fast shift. The Ice Age finished and changed very quickly. So they died out with that. And of course, they weren't here by themselves. The other mammals that we know of today that are still around, they were also here, but because they were smaller, they were much more able to shift and adapt to climate. So, the thinking that Aboriginal people were the sole reason for the demise of the Megafauna is, is actually being challenged within different areas of the debate.

Prof. Alan Rosen (09:05):

I agree, Stewart. There are so many environmental sources around that Ice age and what they call a Pleistocene era. And what we are now in is what people call the Anthropocene Epoch, where human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. Whereas those past phases, it wasn't human activity which had the dominant effect on climate and environment.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (09:30):



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It would've been gradual as well, Alan. So, you know, what we are seeing is climate change happening in the last a hundred years. I mean, I know that Anthropocene Epoch probably started when we did start trying to control and manipulate the environment, but it has sped up at an awful pace probably in the last couple of hundred years. So, I know something, and I had to fact check this myself, that Australia had the most number of mammals go extinct more than any other country in the last a hundred years. And I, I was shocked, and that didn't include the insect life too. So, you know, there was a normal, if you could put it like that change that happened, which was natural. But human activity has starting to rout destruction on environments, and we are seeing the consequences of that.

Prof. Alan Rosen (10:24):

Sometimes it's been accidentally or incidental that the human activity that's caused this and hasn't been intentional, but sometimes it has been very focused. And more and more we see the compact the combined impacts of colonial invasion of social Darwinism with the white conceit of being the pinnacle of creation and with everybody else, poor people, people of colour being dehumanised as expendable gets genocidal at some stages, but with people who are not seen to be the, the, the pinnacle being used up, traded and disposed of as interchangeable cogs like slavery and industrial domination and multinational corporate acquisition and greed and so on. So, it has become exponential.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (11:13):

Absolutely. Climate change, colonisation share the same underlying principles. They think that they can take as much as they want without any consequences. But Stewie have a say, do you have a say, my dear.

Dr. Stewart Sutherland (11:27):

Thanks, Pat. Allen's right. You know, the development of modernism has led not only to the compound effects of colonisation, but also to the distraction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage, climate change, whether it be through storm damage and so forth ruin our sacred sites. And then of course, we have destruction of sacred sites, which is initiated by various different political powers. And by that I mean mining and these also have a psychological effect on us because the destruction of the environment and the expedited loss of animal fauna and flora mean that we're losing our totems. And for Indigenous people globally, these stories teach us things. You know, they teach us the way to interact with each other, the way to interact with our environment, the way to interact with other animal species, and if they're declining and disappearing from the face of the earth, that's our cultural heritage too. And that plays within the psyche of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And, you know, while we'll talk about the devastation of the bushfires in later episodes, we know from that that a lot of people were had severe stress because of the amount of animals that were lost. So this is all interconnected and we we're not talking about it in these terms, but there's trauma caused by each step of climate change

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (12:54):

And different forms as well. I think what you're talking about is, is natural disaster and natural with where the environments change from natural disasters, but the blowing up of, you know, the sacred paintings and caves are deliberate and, and, you know, the impact of that ha has a different feel to it. It's saying that that culture isn't valuable. It's not worth anything that you can just go up there, go there and blow up that much history and not even worry about it. And not just for Indigenous, not just for



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Aboriginal people, I'd say this was, this would be for all people. So, an act like that doesn't only impact on Aboriginal people, it impacts on all of us, and there's a loss for all of us as well.

Prof. Alan Rosen (13:43):

Yeah, and I, and I think what it leads to with extinction of flora and fauna and the loss of totems and the destruction of the sacred site, sometimes in some cultures it has been intentional and, you know, terribly spiteful form of, of warfare and genocide to destroy totems. But sometimes it is just done negligently, and that's when we've seen a lot of that in Australia or because of commercial greed again. So we need to look at that. But there are two directions in which some of this is, is going into that we'll come to later, which is the grief that comes with the loss of those totems and the loss of those sacred sites, which is called by Ashlee Cunsolo and others, eco grief. And our own Australian Glenn Albrecht has developed the concept of solastalgia, which is the loss of pain of not having solace, I suppose, but it, it is really about the loss of habitat, loss of our own habitat and grieving over the loss of our habitual environment.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (14:47):

Stewie, did you explain totems? And I think we have to be careful when use that term as well.

Dr. Stewart Sutherland (14:52):

Look, totems are the, for, for some Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people, it depends on which part of the country. And for Indigenous people more broadly, we have these things called totems. And they can mean many different things to many different people. Aboriginal people get them in a multitude of ways. You know, they're either part of your, your language group, you're gifted a totem when you're maybe conceived or born or by an elder. There's, there's many different ways you can, you can get your totem and not just one, you can have many. But in essence it's a relationship with your totem to ensure that it is able to survive and thrive. So, for example, if one of my totems or the Wiradjuri totem is a goanna, you're not supposed to consume that animal food. You're supposed to help it survive and thrive. So that's a totem in a nutshell. It's a very big and complex story for me to talk about in a small podcast. But that's just the underpinning of, of a totem.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (15:51):

So, I think that we've discussed a little bit about how colonisation is tied into climate change, because colonisation too was not the takeover of countries and people except for you know, taking resources. So that was the beginning of a corporate and capitalistic venture that has led directly to climate change where, you know, we've got a lot of the world with way too much and then much of the world without, you know, that starving and going without resources. So I think things have become incredibly unbalanced. And it's interesting to see too that the most affected by climate change will be those with the least resources. But as we challenge and battle those, those forces, what can we in our different professions, you know, we are in mental health and we know that there's mental health impacts, but Alan, how does psychiatry and psychology engage with climate change?

Prof. Alan Rosen (16:53):

Well, I think for many years they haven't really, and in a sense, we are at a stage where we should be helping our professions and all the young people coming through to be aware of the relevance of having psychological and psychiatric solutions to climate change. And at least to help with the amelioration of



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the, of its effects. But from the beginning when we talk about colonisation, there was a double whammy colonisation of Indigenous people in this country and by other colonising nations and colonised nations. And it started with people developing ways of incarcerating people. There wasn't formal evidence-based treatment. There was just incarceration was the main modality of care so-called and it was very bleak. So, there were lock hospitals where people were unceremoniously thrown in on, mainly on Islanders around Australia and prisons. And there were psychiatric institutions all leading to long term involuntary incarceration and separation from their families and from Country. They're a custom country. So, while we call it a double whammy, and this comes from an article which will be available called 100% Mabo, is that they were colonised once by the invading people coming to this country. And they were then colonised again by the psychiatric system or the system of institutionalisation of people who were considered to be mentally ill. So, if you were mentally ill, you got this double whammy and you are Aboriginal, you would get this double whammy colonisation.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (18:30):

I'm not sure if people were institutionalised because of mental illness. I think pretty well people were just shipped off to missions and reserves. I think that would've been a luxury that wouldn't have been afforded to Aboriginal people to have their mental health considered in any way. I think that they were seen as pretty well second class citizens and deserving of, of, of nothing. So I think from my perspective, it wasn't so much as a double whammy, that was a continuous story of colonisation. It was dispossession from the lands which people owned and had a very deep spiritual tie with and put into missions and reserves. And that land then being changed for pastoral purposes, being changed forever. And a lot of the conflicts that happened in the frontier were because Aboriginal people weren't able to get their usual livestock that they would normally hunt. And you know, they'd try to take the settlers' livestock and there were lots of conflicts about that, but they were just pushed out. So, you know, that's a relatively recent truth that's come about, is that a true story of colonisation, which is one of genocide and dispossession. But there is also the continuous story of colonisation was a cultural colonisation too, where Aboriginal values and ways of seeing the world of being were considered very primitive and unworthy. The pinnacle of civilization was from a very social Darwinism perspective, you wore certain clothes practise culture in certain ways. So western society never recognised anyone except themselves as being civilised.

Prof. Alan Rosen (20:14):

I just wanted to just finish that point, if that's all right, Pat. But in fact, what happened as part of this process of colonisation is people got thrown into institutions as part of the process of relieving them of their land involuntarily and also of separating people from their families and their country. But also there was misdiagnosis on the grand scale. Like people who would protest would sometimes be diagnosed as psychotic and then put into psychiatric institutions for that. Sometimes their, sorry, business of grieving, which could go on for a long time was misdiagnosed as depression. And this led to long periods of institutionalisation as well.

Dr. Stewart Sutherland (20:58):

So, my knowledge is people were being locked up for experimental reasons, doesn't matter what, whether it's psychiatry or leprosy. And they were used as involuntary guinea pigs to experiment on. That



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is for, you're right Alan, that is for in some cases psychiatry, but mainly it was for leprosy to experiment with the oil-based drugs.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (21:20):

So, Alan, from your experience as a psychiatrist, what have been the limitations of your profession and what could be the strength of your profession? Not only for Indigenous people, but all people into the future? So, can you just give me a bit of an overview?

Prof. Alan Rosen (21:37):

Yeah, well these are things we could learn from Indigenous people and the work that has been done to observe what happens with changes of conditions. And one of the things I would look to you, Pat, because of all your work on, on suicide and Indigenous peoples was the work of Michael Chandler, who I know you knew well in British Columbia, showing that if you made sure that all the community agencies had Aboriginal or had Indigenous representation, not just in their boards and in their management, but as people who were workers within them, to engage people in a way that they would be trusted for. Not just the usual ones of police and health, but you know, the fire department and various other community agencies. And if you did that and made sure that they're really represented the Indigenous communities, they were supposed to be looking after the suicide rates, particularly in young people would improve.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (22:36):

So, it resonated with us Chandler's work because self-determination was central to it, and also cultural reclamation. So, you know, our solutions need to be cultural. That's his legacy that he's left. But for us, you know, part of it is challenging mainstream diagnosis, mainstream models that have been imposed on Indigenous people. Some might still be useful. I wouldn't be throwing out babies with the bath water, but there needs to be also a place for Indigenous models and Indigenous approaches. So we've been very much working on a social and emotional wellbeing model. And in that, if you can imagine that there is the notion of selfhood in the centre, but self is defined in terms of your connection to your physical self, but also to your mind and to your emotions, but then to your family and then to your community, to your Culture, to your Country.

(23:37):

So Country is important in this and for your entire wellbeing. And then to your spirit and spirituality, your ancestors. So that is a holistic approach to wellbeing. That is everything. It's your physical self, it's, you know, you within your place, within your family and community and within your physical environment. In a spiritual way around that model are the influences of historical determinants and also social determinants. So, for Indigenous people, this story of colonisation has not finished. It continues. We are still facing institutionalised and cultural racism and that has a very negative impact on us. But there's also been a movement of reclaiming culture, which lends itself to great promise of the future. And that model and other Indigenous models, I'm only speaking about one, is not only for us, although they're, they're developed by us for us, but they are for everyone as well. So everyone can share in that. But I think that connection to land is important and that needs to be unpacked much more in the face of climate change as well, because all those different domains need to be in balance and in harmony.

Dr. Stewart Sutherland (24:57):



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Just your point, Pat on culture, well, Chandler found, you know, self-determination was important. There was a big cultural element to that and the re regaining of our cultural rights. And I just want to link that back to climate change. And, and our last topic, which you know, is, is decolonization in the, in the space of colonisation, we've had large scale farming that's actually destroyed a lot of our, our land. And so, you know, quite often you talk about Aboriginal people being afraid of the healthcare system because of historic events. We're actually a bit wary of engaging the climate debate cause we're not being engaged in it. And so we are really losing our cultural, our cultural knowledge in a number of ways due to climate change or the change in climate, should I say. Just wanted to pick that point up and bring it back to climate change.

Prof. Alan Rosen (25:48):

Okay. What I'd like to say, just to summarise and to, to underline what Pat's been saying cause I think that's so important is these approaches are sometimes called two ways or two worlds or two eyed seeing depending on, on which Indigenous culture you come from. But the sir Professor Mason Durie who's the, the first Māori psychiatrist in New Zealand and very eminent and he, he has been talking and operationalizing two ways, thinking and practise in New Zealand. In other words, making sure that you have a balance between the western evidence-based ways of working clinically and also spiritual and traditional healing practises, which would be equivalent to the social and emotional wellbeing. But I think we have examples right throughout Australia about how those aspects are important. Like the Aboriginal mental health worker program, which has a mentorship program attached to it, did have they learn in that degree program, both the most up to date Western approaches and the most effective spiritual healing practises as well. And there's also the Aboriginal Medical Services and NACCHO, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, and that's the national group. And then there's ACCHO in the states and they promote those ways of working too, both clinically and working through traditional healing practises as well. So they're, they're operationalizing what Pat has been saying.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (27:25):

And going back to Country too, because I've seen a lot of Aboriginal programs that are, are very much about healing people by taking them back to Country and doing all sorts of different programs on Country. And I know in our consultations that we've undertaken for various programs; Aboriginal people always say we need to go back to Country. So being on Country is very important. It can be very spiritually renewing. And we know that for western society too. Usually if you go to have a retreat or to have a holiday, you know, a break away, a quiet time, you're not going into a city, you're going into the beach or the country or whatever. We have a yearning to reconnect with our environment.

Prof. Alan Rosen (28:10):

And sometimes the elders arrange that by collectively purchasing a piece of land in a remote area. But hopefully, at least in the places I've been working near a river cuz water is, is healing as well in that respect. And I think the land councils have been involved in that as well.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (28:28):

Yeah, and I hope that's gonna be one of the big issues for the future too. I know that social emotional wellbeing is one of the close the gap targets and there's about to be a lot of work around that in what would a service look like? What would workers look like? What would a paradigm look like? So I think



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we're gonna see a burst of creativity coming from social emotional wellbeing. Again, you know, the developments are for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the first instance, but it is also for everyone.

(28:59):

Oh, one of the things I forgot to mention is that, you know, we do need holistic approaches and we do need to focus in some areas as well. But I probably wanna talk a little bit about Indigenous resilience and how we've responded to and challenged racism such as in Black Lives Matter and you know, other social movements and in our own disciplines. But there'll be opportunities in the other podcast for us to say what our disciplines can do. And I think learning the histories, number one, and I'll talk a little bit about the IAPT project in a later podcast, but Stewie, what makes us strong? What's gonna take Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the future?

Dr. Stewart Sutherland (29:41):

I think our past will take us into the future in the respect that we understand what it's like to forge forward and to have resilience. And you know, you mentioned Black Lives Matter, COVID and the lockdowns and George Floyd and, and even to some extent the local case of the Walker case, which I'll leave up to the, the listeners to, to investigate has changed the landscape we are in to actually listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And I think everyone's starting to understand that holistic care is important, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So the social and emotional wellbeing and the holistic care is talked about in ways that it wasn't talked about even, you know, let's say two years ago. You know, even though social and emotional wellbeing has been around for a long time, people are starting to understand the concept. And I think that gives a lot of hope and a lot of, to me at least, a lot of joy to know that we're starting to even that keel out and get some representation.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (30:38):

Yeah, so I guess the issue about racism is that, you know, it seems like we take two steps forward and then one back. But what I find refreshing is that there's great numbers in stepping forward and the response to Black Lives Matter has been amazing and global and also Indigenous responses as well because we, we'll be touching on a little bit more in other podcasts about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people handle COVID-19 splendidly. And that's if people are given an opportunity to make their own decisions and to direct how things should be, to be in charge of matters, there's a good outcome. So, to me, how we handled COVID-19 was a study in self-determination, if you like, but we will talk a little bit more in detail about what happened and who the players were and, and the good outcomes that were had.

(31:34):

We'll also talk a little bit about Indigenous approaches to climate change as a source of inspiration for mental healthcare ecosystems and complexity. You know, we can't just pretend there's an individual on their own and maybe there's a mind bit and a body bit and that's all. We are a part of a greater thing. We're a part of a society and groups of people that's very important. But we're also a part of an environment that is being destroyed. But there's also a lot of people who are changing that around. So I remain optimistic. I think there's enough people who are concerned and later on we'll be saying, well, what can we do as individuals because it's all well and good to speak about this, but it is a despairing



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scene to look at. And so, you know, there's that feeling of helplessness. So, we will be talking about, well, what can we as individuals do in later podcast?

Prof. Alan Rosen (32:33):

Can I just finish that thing about ecosystems? I thought that was really important, what you said about ecosystems. There are now research and planning groups getting together around the whole idea that I think comes from the Indigenous understanding of the realities that we have to work with to manage our lives and manage Country. And that is having mental health ecosystems and complexity science as a basis for more holistic evaluation, planning and practical implementation of services. You know, one of those research groups that we've been associated with has been the one run in the Australian National University by Luis Salvador-Carulla and his colleagues. And quite a lot of research is now starting to emerge internationally in that arena.

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (33:17):

Okay, well we are actually drawing this session, this first podcast to a close. So, on this episode of MHPN presents our conversation about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander on wellbeing and climate change. There'll be a further three podcasts. Some will be looking particularly at the relationship or the role of the mental health professions, including that of Indigenous mental health and climate change. So do come back for further discussions and do look at the website there. And we'll be putting not only our bios and details of the work we do will be on the website. We will also put important references that have shaped our discussions on there. So please go to our landing page, thank you for your commitment to an engagement with this interdisciplinary person-centered mental health care. So, it's goodbye from Stewie. Stewart, you're supposed to say goodbye.

Prof. Alan Rosen (34:19):

Oh, <Laugh>

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (34:20):

<Laugh>. Thanks Pat. Goodbye everyone, and goodbye from Alan.

Prof. Alan Rosen (34:23):

Thanks everybody!

Prof. Pat Dudgeon (34:25):

And it's goodbye from me for this podcast and we'll be speaking with each other and with you in the next podcast looking forward.

Host (34:35):

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