

19 March, 2014

## St George Hospital Interfaith Forum set to open new dialogue

Religious leaders from the Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Coptic Orthodox faiths will come together in a panel discussion to express their views and advance understanding of religious and spiritual diversity at an Interfaith Forum, to be held on 28 March, 2014 at St George Hospital.

According to Vivianne Challita-Ajaka, Sector Manager, Diversity and Aboriginal Health for St George and Sutherland Hospitals, the aim of the Forum is to increase awareness about different faiths and to promote respect, harmony, peace and understanding within the St George area and wider community.

“The Forum is aimed at health professionals, police officers, local government and non-government agencies, community leaders, community organisations and general service providers,” Ms Challita-Ajaka said.

“The interactive panel of religious leaders will speak to more than 70 attendees about common problems and issues, such as how people of different faiths engage with society to promote community harmony; religious expectations among the family and wider community and how they interact with other religious groups.

“It’s important we recognise that religious practices and beliefs can vary markedly within each religion and spirituality; and that not all people of a particular faith necessarily practise their faith in the same way.

“Additionally, it’s an opportunity to raise awareness of different religious faiths amongst our local population, how these impact on people’s beliefs and behaviours when it comes to health, and how we can work together to provide the best possible healthcare services to our patients.”

Statistics show that St George residents come from more than 80 different countries and speak more than 70 different languages at home.

More than 43 percent of the St George community speaks a language other than English at home, with the main languages being Cantonese, Mandarin, Greek, Arabic, Macedonian, Italian and Spanish.

This year’s Harmony Day – which is celebrated around Australia on 21 March each year – will be celebrated at the Interfaith Forum.

“The continuing message for Harmony Day 2014 is that *Everyone Belongs – Living in Harmony*, which means all Australians are a welcome part of our country, regardless of their background,” Ms Challita-Ajaka said.

“It’s time to reflect on where Australia has come from, recognising the traditional owners of this land. It’s also about community participation, inclusiveness and respect – and celebrating the different cultures that make Australia a great place to live.”

The Interfaith Forum is a partnership between St George and Sutherland Hospitals, District Multicultural Health Service and St George Local Area Command.

**Media opportunity:**

Date: Friday 28 March, 2014  
Time: 12.30pm – interactive panel discussion with religious leaders  
Venue: St George Hospital  
Research and Education Centre  
6 – 10 South Street, Kogarah