

CLOSE THE GAP

Government yet to develop plan to Close the Gap: new report

The Australian Government has no comprehensive plan to close the gap on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health inequality by 2030 despite committing to one almost two years ago, according to a new report out today.

The Close the Gap campaign's *Shadow Report*, on the Government's progress on 'closing the gap', also found a lack of critical support for Aboriginal medical services and the absence of a true partnership approach by Government.

Chair of the Close the Gap Steering Committee and former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma, whose 2005 Social Justice Report laid the groundwork for the Close the Gap campaign, said the Shadow Report outlined what was missing in the Government's approach and detailed ways in which its commitments to closing the gap could be met.

It holds the Prime Minister accountable to key commitments he and former Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson made in the Statement of Intent at the Indigenous Health Equality Summit in March 2008.

"The Government should be commended for taking significant steps forward and for honouring its commitment to report annually, but there are gaps in its approach, and the lack of a comprehensive, long-term plan of action is one of these," Mr Calma said. "Without an evidence-based and targeted plan, efforts to close the gap will simply fail."

The report also finds:

- The Government's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples happens on an ad hoc basis and focuses on policy implementation rather than design. It is common sense that Indigenous health experts and those using services have a say in what they look like. A more inclusive and genuine partnership is critical to close the gap;
- The Government's National Indigenous Workforce Training Plan needs to be more comprehensive to meet the gaps in the Indigenous health workforce;
- Despite committing to supporting and developing Aboriginal Community Controlled Health services in urban, rural and remote areas – which the Australian Medical Association recognises is the preferred option for providing health care to Indigenous peoples – the bulk of the \$1.6 billion injection into Indigenous health is going towards mainstream health services;
- There is no comprehensive plan for addressing the social and cultural determinants of health; and
- A lack of adequate data collection and monitoring over many years means that a detailed breakdown of health services gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is not available.

Among the Shadow Report recommendations is the development of a capacity-building plan for the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector, together with an injection of around \$150 million, scaling up to \$500 million over five years, then \$500 million annually; a national partnership agreement for the achievement of Indigenous health equality by 2030; and a comprehensive, long-term plan of action to close the gap that is targeted to need and evidence-based.

“All the commitments the Government signed up to in the Statement of Intent are critical to closing the gap if we are to end the health crisis that sees babies born to Indigenous mothers die at twice the rate of other babies, Indigenous Australian men suffering heart disease and stroke at three times the rate of other Australian men, and Indigenous Australian women dying from cervical cancer at a rate five times higher than their non-Indigenous counterparts,” Mr Calma said.

“The Close the Gap campaign urges Australian governments to meet their commitments as a matter of urgency.”

For information or interviews, please contact Laurelle Keough at Oxfam Australia on 0409 960 100

Note to editors:

The report highlights successful Aboriginal medical services operating in the Northern Territory, New South Wales and Victoria. A state-run Queensland service is also featured. Staff from these services are available for interview.

Close the Gap is a coalition of more than 40 of Australia's leading health, human rights and Aboriginal organisations. The campaign was launched in April 2007.