Media Release

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Proposed changes to 18C throw Reconciliation out the window

The Government's planned changes to the Racial Discrimination Act and the Human Rights Commission will weaken the protection of Aboriginal Australians from racial abuse in this country at a time when suicide rates in Indigenous communities are among the worst in the world, the peak body for Aboriginal medical services said today.

NACCHO Chair Matthew Cooke said just a month after the Prime Minister committed to a new partnership with Aboriginal people through the Redfern Statement, he has put forward measures that would have potentially devastating impacts on the health and well-being of Aboriginal people.

Mr Cooke said all Senators must carefully consider the issues and rise above petty point scoring politics to defeat these amendments – which are based on an hysterical media campaign about the merits of the legislation due to a single court case and a recently published cartoon.

“Any changes to section 18C will alienate the very Aboriginal people the government says it is trying to support, and create even deeper divisions in our community,” he said.

“I urge all Senators to respect the voice of the first Australian peoples in this debate, listen to Aboriginal people about what needs to be done to close the gap, and vote down changes to laws that are likely to make it even wider.”

Mr Cooke said it was outrageous that watering down racial hate laws is a priority for the Government when the latest Closing the Gap report showed just one of seven targets are on track, and the Don Dale Royal Commission is shining a light on the treatment of Aboriginal children in detention.

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people take their own lives at a rate five times that of other Australians and infant mortality rates are going backwards.

“It is so disappointing that after all the talk in Canberra in February and the goodwill that was generated, the Government is sending such a poor message to Aboriginal people about acceptance in our own country,” Mr Cooke said.

“Racism and discrimination have well documented negative impacts on mental health. If we fail to deal with the alarming rates of poor Mental Health in Aboriginal people, it will have ongoing detrimental impacts in preventing and managing chronic disease.

“The Government's priorities should be on positive measures like the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan, which recognises the impacts of racism and discrimination inherent in the health system, and supporting the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector to fix the national crisis in Aboriginal health.”

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