$676 million federal cuts to remote housing will lift already-shocking rheumatic fever rates

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‘We share the concern of state governments, the Close the Gap campaign and the National Congress of First Peoples at the recent cuts by the Australian Government to the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Housing’, Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association Strategic Programs Director Dr Chris Bourke said today.

The cut will see funding from the federal government drop from $776 million over two years to just $100 million, with that $100 million going only to the Northern Territory.

‘Our major concern is that overcrowded housing in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is the primary cause of rheumatic fever in Australia.

‘Indigenous Australians suffer from this completely preventable disease at 26 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians. Australia is one of the few countries in the world where rheumatic fever is still a serious problem, and it’s a national disgrace.

‘The consequences of rheumatic fever include early death, heart surgery for children, young adults with permanent disability, and high-risk pregnancies for affected women.

‘It is a major contributor to the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

‘The treatment for a single episode of rheumatic fever requires painful injections of antibiotics every month for at least 10 years.

‘Addressing the social determinants of health was at the core of the Close the Gap Statement of Intent signed in 2008 by Indigenous health leaders, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

‘Now, a decade later, as the Commonwealth seeks to refresh the Closing the Gap strategy, it is incredibly disappointing to see the termination of a program so fundamentally embedded within that framework’, Dr Bourke said.

For more information on the AHHA, visit http://ahha.asn.au. This media release is available online.

The Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association is the national peak body for public and not-for-profit hospitals, and community and primary healthcare services.