Increased support to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations needed to Close the Gap in life expectancy gap

The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) calls for urgent and radically different action to Close the Gap.

“The Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) commitment to Close the Gap in 2007 was welcome. It was a positive step towards mobilising government resources and effort to address the under investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ health”, said NACCHO Chairperson, Mr John Singer.

“But ten years on the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians is widening, not closing.

Jurisdictions currently spend $2 per Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander for every $1 for the rest of the population whereas the Commonwealth in the past has spent only $1.21 per Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person for every $1 spent on the rest of the population. NACCHO calls for the Commonwealth to increase funding to Close the Gap”, said John Singer.

NACCHO is a proud member of the Close the Gap Campaign and stands by its report released today: ‘A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset’.

The review found that the Close the Gap strategy has never been fully implemented. Underfunding in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services and infrastructure has persisted – funding is not always based on need, has been cut and in some cases redirected through mainstream providers.

The role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) in delivering more successful care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples than the mainstream service providers is not properly recognised. A health equality plan was not in place until the release of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan Implementation Plan 2015, and this is unfunded. And despite the initial investment in remote housing, there has not been a sufficient and properly resourced plan to adequately address the social determinants of health.

The framework underpinning the Close the Gap strategy – a national approach and leadership, increased accountability, clear roles and responsibilities and increased funding through National Partnership Agreements – has unraveled and in some cases been abandoned altogether.
“The Close the Gap refresh being considered by the COAG provides an opportunity to reflect upon and reform current policy settings and institutionalised thinking,” Mr Singer said.

The Close the Gap targets should remain, as should the National Indigenous Reform Agreement framework and associated National Partnership Agreements. They serve to focus the nation and increase our collective accountability.

“What we need however is radically different action to achieve the targets”, said Mr Singer.

“This starts with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their community controlled health organisations and peak representatives having a genuine say over their own health and wellbeing and health policies.

“Increased funding is needed for ACCHOs to expand in regions where there are low access to health services and high levels of disease, and in areas of mental health, disability services and aged care. ACCHOs have consistently demonstrated that they achieve better results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, at better value for money.

A comprehensive and funded Indigenous health workforce is required to improve the responsiveness of health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples and increase cultural safety.

A boost in disease specific initiatives is urgently needed in areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a high burden of disease or are particularly vulnerable, like ear health and renal disease, delivered through ACCHOs.”

“There also needs to be a way in which NACCHO and other Indigenous health leaders can come together with COAG to agree a ‘refreshed approach’ to Close the Gap”, said Mr Singer. NACCHO has proposed to Government a way forward to Close the Gap in life expectancy and is looking forward to working with the Australian Government on the further development of its proposals.

The only way to close the gap is with the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are fully engaged and have control over their health and wellbeing any ‘refresh’ will be marginal at best, and certainly won’t close the gap.


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