

Media Release

CLOSETHEGAP

Wednesday 14 May 2008

Good start in Budget, but more needed to Close the Gap

The Close the Gap coalition today welcomed Budget measures aimed at closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

It particularly acknowledged the fulfilment of the Government's election promises, including extra funding for maternal and child health services, and acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease among Indigenous children.

It also noted the continued commitment to the Northern Territory, but wanted to see this extended throughout the country.

The coalition said these budget initiatives were a good first step. Targets set by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) working group on Indigenous health later this year would be invaluable in taking these initiatives even further in next year's budget.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma said that overall, the government's intention to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was welcomed and essential in order to see any long-term and sustainable improvements in Indigenous health.

"I welcome those budget initiatives which go straight to the core of closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy, such as the money earmarked for maternal and child health services," Mr Calma said.

"The money to expand primary health care in the Northern Territory is welcomed but falls way short of what is needed to improve primary health care services around the country - especially with 75 per cent of Australia's Indigenous population living in non-remote areas.

"The budget Indigenous health initiatives are welcome indeed but more is needed to ensure an Indigenous baby born in 2030 has the same life expectation, the same access to quality health services and the same life outcomes as non-Indigenous Australians."

Dr Mick Adams, chair of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), the peak body for Aboriginal medical services, said: "NACCHO has welcomed the government's ongoing commitment to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services, but a major injection of funds is needed to bring the sector to a level that would, for the first time, match the level of need in the Aboriginal community."

Australian Indigenous Doctors Association President Dr Tamara Mackean supported the government's focus on strengthening a healthy start to life for kids through improved child and maternal health services, addressing alcohol and other drugs, including the biggest killer – tobacco - and the down-payment on a growing future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health workforce.

"Achieving our nation's collective goal of closing the gap on life expectancy within a generation will require more substantial and sustained investment by the Australian, State and Territory governments over the long term," Dr Mackean said. "As partners in the goal, we will all work closely with governments to determine the requisite targets and necessary investments."

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) National Director Gary Highland urged the Government to draw on the \$10 billion Health Fund announced by the Treasurer to claw back the shortfall in Aboriginal primary health care spending.

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“Australia’s single biggest health infrastructure investment should be used to overcome the nation’s single biggest health challenge – the appalling 17 year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people,” Mr Highland said.

Oxfam Australia’s Director of Public Policy James Ensor acknowledged the thousands of people who had made Close the Gap the largest campaign to improve indigenous health.

“These supporters have helped put indigenous health firmly on the government’s agenda,” he said. “We now want to ensure the issue remains a priority and will be watching closely to see that the Government delivers on its Statement of Intent commitments, signed earlier this year in partnership with Aboriginal leaders.”

Close the Gap is a coalition of some of Australia's leading health, human rights and Aboriginal organisations committed to working with Federal, State and Territory Governments to narrow the life expectancy gap between the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander population and other Australians within a generation.

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