

A call for health equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) has launched a campaign on the appalling state of Indigenous Health in Australia. NATSIEC/MIPH campaign have put their name to an open letter calling on the Government to end this national shame. The letter is below.

Dear Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers, parliamentarians and Australian public,

We, the undersigned, are deeply concerned that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have not shared in the health gains enjoyed by other Australians in the last 100 years. It is a national scandal that Indigenous Australians live 17 years less than other Australians. Indigenous Australians continue to needlessly suffer and die early, not from a lack of solutions or government commitments, but from a lack of political will and action.

We call on all Australian Governments to commit to a plan of action to achieve health equality for Indigenous peoples within twenty-five years.

This commitment must receive bipartisan support from federal, state and territory parliaments as well as all sections of Australian society.

Indigenous Australians die from preventable diseases such as rheumatic heart disease, eradicated among the rest of the Australian population and they have lower access to primary health care and health infrastructure that the rest of Australia takes for granted. This is not acceptable. We need to intensify our efforts and treat the Indigenous health crisis as a national priority.

There are already national commitments and policies in place to address Indigenous health inequality - what is missing are appropriately funded programs that target the most vulnerable. There are many stories of Indigenous success and high achievement that exist, which we can celebrate and learn from.

The signatories to this letter are committed to working in close and active collaboration with Indigenous peoples, communities and governments to achieve health equality within a generation. We commit ourselves to being engaged in identifying necessary actions and finding solutions.

At minimum, achieving health equality will require:

- Measures to ensure equal access for Indigenous peoples to primary health care and health infrastructure.

- Increased support for developing the Indigenous health workforce.
- A commitment to support and nurture Indigenous community controlled health services.
- A focus on improving the accessibility of mainstream health services for Indigenous peoples.
- An urgent focus on early childhood development, maternal health, chronic illness and diseases.
- Supporting the building blocks of good health, such as awareness and availability of nutrition, physical activity, fresh food, healthy lifestyles, adequate housing and the other social determinants of health.

It is inconceivable that a country as wealthy as Australia cannot solve a health crisis affecting less than 3% of its population.

Rapid improvements can be achieved in the health of Indigenous peoples by comprehensive, targeted and well resourced government action, through partnership with Indigenous peoples.

We call on the support of the people of Australia to help stop this needless suffering.
Yours respectfully,

(The list of agencies signed up to the campaign include:

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
Congress of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Nurses
Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory
Australian Indigenous Doctors Association
Amnesty International Australia
Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine
Australian Council of Social Service
Australian Council for International Development
Australian General Practice Network
Australian Nursing Federation
Australian Red Cross
Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation
Caritas Australia
Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health
Diplomacy Training Program
Fred Hollows Foundation
Gnibi the College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, Southern Cross University
Human Rights Law Resource Centre
Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth
Indigenous Law Centre
Make Indigenous Poverty History campaign
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Council

National Association of Community Legal Centres
National Children's and Youth Law Centre
National Rural Health Alliance
Oxfam Australia
Professor Daniel Tarantola, Chair of Health and Human Rights, University of New South
Public Health Association of Australia
Quaker Services Australia
Royal Australasian College of Physicians
Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
Rural Doctors Association of Australia
Save the Children Australia
Telethon Institute for Child Health Research
UNICEF Australia
Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre)

For more information visit www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/health/