Major health organisations call for commitment to a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander oral and dental health plan

The National Aboriginal and Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) and the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) today urged both major political parties to commit to a two-year old plan that would dramatically improve the oral health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Both organisations said the plan could be implemented for as little as $10 million a year and could be based on the blueprint laid down in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Oral Health Action Plan.

NACCHO’s Chair, Mr Tony McCartney, emphasised that in the lead-up to the coming Election both Parties had found significant additional funds for a range of new health initiatives, in particular around Medicare.

“Yet despite Aboriginal oral health being significantly worse than in the rest of the community and having a plan in place to fix it, nothing has been done,” Mr McCartney said. “Given the modest amount of money required we think the Australian Government should lead and spend to fix this problem. If they can work co-operatively on it with the States, so much the better”.

Mr McCartney emphasised that one of the key findings of the Oral Health Action Plan published by the Department of Health and Ageing in 2003, was:

“The provision of oral health services in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services was identified as a model that works well for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, there is insufficient funding, inadequate numbers of dentists and dental therapists to cater for demand - - -, and inadequate Aboriginal Health Worker training. There are also difficulties in staff recruitment and training”.

Both organisations emphasised the need for the introduction of the Oral Health Action Plan, adding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were very much worse off in terms of dental disease and have a high level of untreated tooth decay. The fluoridation of water supplies to many more Aboriginal communities is essential.
“Poor oral health comprises overall health. This issue of shocking oral and dental health amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians should be one of the nation’s number one health priorities,” said Sue McAlpin, Chairperson of the NRHA. “Access and equity issues to dental services should be looked at for all people in rural and remote Australia.”

Changes to Medicare alone are not the answer to this challenge. Almost 75 percent of GPs never treat an Aboriginal patient. A major part of the new program should therefore be delivered through dentists, oral hygienists and medical officers employed by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services.

Rural and remote areas are particularly short of dentists and oral hygienists and targeted dental workforce initiatives are badly needed.

Mr McCartney and Ms McAlpin called on the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader to use the Election Campaign to make Aboriginal health a national priority. Poor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander oral health is symptomatic of the appalling health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians overall.

“A valuable start can be made now with this more specific challenge to address dental health”.

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