

To: The Editor

Individualism and Privatisation Likely to Kill Indigenous Health

Every attempt to change the social and economic conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a social experiment. There are no overarching approaches that have proved successful in all situations, or under all circumstances. However, there is evidence that specific underlying social and economic parameters affect the health of Indigenous communities, whether they are located in isolated communities or in poor urban communities.

There have been visionaries and community leaders in many generations that have advocated for a variety of approaches to improve social and economic conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Often these have come from vastly different ideological bases. The past ten years has seen a steady movement of ideology in Indigenous issues away from community enhancement and development, including cultural and spiritual development, to what has been loosely called "practical reconciliation".

Last year the Australian National University published a study that, by and large, showed that against all underlying social and economic indicators there has been little or no improvement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities since the Keating days. That's effectively a decade with no significant across the board improvement in the underlying social and economic living conditions for our Indigenous peoples.

So now, in awareness that practical reconciliation has made no practical difference, and that the Australian Government's removal of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission has eliminated direct and democratic representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, how will Australians face our obligations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People? For the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA), this issue is nowhere more important than in the health arena.

The current ideological push coming from the right wing of politics is increasingly focusing on the Western capitalistic model of individualism and privatisation. In terms of public health issues, all the social evidence, the experience of history, is that this is an inappropriate model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A number of issues must be raised about a recent article by Helen Hughes and Jenness Warin, published in the Centre for Independent Studies Issues Analysis arguing for individualism and privatisation in the delivery of health care to Indigenous peoples.

Firstly, poor Indigenous health outcomes are not confined to remote communities, but are also a substantial issue in towns and cities. Secondly, the article failed to acknowledge the positive results that have been achieved for and by Aboriginal people who choose to live on the most remote outstations away from 'larger' settlements'. They are not forced to live out there, as the article incorrectly suggested. Thirdly, their suggestion that 'privatisation' of Indigenous health care would improve outcomes is contrary to all evidence, which is that this would lead to less efficient health care. As well, it is likely it would be even less accessible than at present if delivered under a

'user-pays' model.

The simplistic approach of this article, to paint the up-to-recent Indigenous policy agenda as primarily driven by one ideology (socialism) is a patronising dismissal of the considerable role that Indigenous people have had in shaping this policy. In contrast, the authors' promotion of individualism and privatisation seems to be driven solely by ideology rather than evidence or the experience of history.

The authors are not only ignoring the evidence that shows successful delivery and outcomes in Indigenous health, but have failed to acknowledge that Indigenous health continues to be grossly under resourced. There is evidence from a number of remote health services that delivery of clinical and public health services are occurring at far higher and more appropriate levels than that provided by general practitioners around Australia. For example, across Northern Australia, people with diabetes are much more likely to receive the recommended reviews and are achieving much better control of blood pressure. Models of care in urban Aboriginal Medical Services and remote clinics, using a team approach, with practice nurses, general practitioners, allied health staff including Aboriginal Health Workers and public health staff, are increasingly being recognised by health professionals and governments across Australia as the model most likely to improve the Australian populations' health.

Despite the massive under resourcing of Indigenous health care delivery, dedicated professionals, working with community organisations and representatives are making significant gains. Mortality trends in the Northern Territory, for example, have shown dramatic reduction in death rates across all age groups and both sexes in the last forty years. Childhood mortality has plummeted by 80%, although these changes have slowed in recent years. The group with the least gains, middle-aged men, are living and dying with chronic diseases such as heart attacks and diabetes. This group, with focused help and effective and appropriate services, should benefit from the successful public health work that has seen cardiovascular deaths significantly reduced in the rest of the population.

This point of flux, where different generations of Indigenous people and different communities are trying to develop culturally appropriate and evidenced based approaches to their futures, is deeply complicated by the void that the Australian Government has left on this issue. It is a time to guard against ideologues, a time to ensure that decision makers listen to the Indigenous communities in both the city and the bush and look solidly at the evidence. The public health issues for Indigenous communities in Australia are in desperate need of improvement. But, if Australians succumb to the attraction of individualism and privatisation, it will be the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who will suffer, yet again.

Yours faithfully

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29 April 2005