

PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA
MEDIA RELEASE

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UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 6AM ON TUESDAY 7 APRIL 2009

BEYOND THE REVOLVING DOOR: INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS & MENTAL HEALTH IN PRISONS

A wide range of people with an interest in offender health and crime prevention have come together in Melbourne this week for the Public Health Association of Australia's (PHAA) Justice Health Conference. The overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians and mental health issues in prisons will be among the issues featured today on the final day of the conference.

"Incarceration rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to worsen more than 20 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody began in October 1987. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now make up 24% of the total prison population (up to 80% in the NT) - an increase from 14% in 1992. Indigenous juveniles are 21 times more likely to be in detention than their non-Indigenous counterparts. These statistics are staggering considering that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up only 2.5% of the total Australian population," said Michael Moore, PHAA's Chief Executive Officer.

"It is time that the Federal Government took some responsibility for offender health and reviewed the resourcing of health services to ensure comprehensive and effective service provision - from prevention and early intervention programs designed to prevent offending and imprisonment, through to post-release services designed to help prisoners re-connect with their families and communities. Examining the provision of Medicare to prisoners is a priority in this context; they currently lose their right to Medicare on entry to prison. Incarceration provides an important, but underutilised, public health opportunity to access this highly disadvantaged group, commence treatment, and improve health outcomes for the community," said Mr Moore.

"Among the experts speaking on the closing day of the conference will be Associate Professor Ted Wilkes, Chair of the National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee and Father Peter Norden from the Melbourne School of Law at the University of Melbourne," said Associate Professor Tony Butler from the National Drug Research Institute, Convenor of the Conference Committee.

"We are also fortunate to have Wade Noonan MP, State Member for the Williamstown District and Bill Noonan from the Transport Workers Union coming to talk about the Bridge Project, that provides mentoring, education and employment options for young offenders to break the cycle of re-offending," said Associate Professor Butler.

What: PHAA *Justice Health in Australia: Beyond the Convict Era* Conference
Where: Hilton on the Park, 192 Wellington Parade, Melbourne
When: Tuesday 7 April 2009
Time: 8:30am – 3:30pm

For further information/comment:

Melanie Walker, Conference Media Contact:

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A summarised version of the conference program and biographies for the speakers in plenary sessions can be found on the PHAA website at: <http://www.phaa.net.au/documents/PrisonBrochure.pdf>

The Victorian Government Department of Justice is a partner to the event, which is also being supported by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health and an education grant from GlaxoSmithKline.