Prison health is public health: Justice Health call for action

Delegates at the Public Health Association of Australia-convened Justice Health Conference 2019 have united to call for better health services for all people as they enter and exit jail.

"Prison health is public health. The principal of provision of health services in prison that are equivalent to that of the community is as important today as it has ever been,” said Michael Doyle with the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA).

Dr Doyle is the co-convenor of the Association’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Special Interest Group. A two-day Justice Health Conference, bringing together experts from academia, community practice and the courts, opens in Sydney today.

“Many people who go to prison often have mental health, disability, alcohol and other drug use issues where they can receive support and treatment, however, it would be far more cost effective to provide such services in the community.”

“Doing so may lead to reduced imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people who continue to be vastly overrepresented in Australian prisons,” Dr Doyle said.

The Public Health Association is appealing to politicians at federal level, across the states, and across all parties, to show sustained leadership to find and resource ways that can reduce the over-representation of Indigenous people in custody.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rates of imprisonment are shockingly higher today than during the landmark 1991 Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Royal Commission.

“Successive strategies have rolled around, but never actually driven imprisonment down,” Dr Doyle said.

He also said is it critical to ensure people are well supported when they leave jail so they do not resume the same behaviour which led them there in the first place.

"What can make a significant difference is stronger post-release programs that are culturally appropriate, flexible, non-punitive and community based. Former prisoners do not want to report to a corrections officer, rather they want to liaise with someone in the community.”

The Public Health Association of Australia has welcomed the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) announcement late last year of a new draft justice target be added to the Close the Gap agenda.

"The draft target must be firmed up,” said PHAA CEO, Terry Slevin.
"It needs to cover the entire criminal justice system, requiring strategies and action from the courts, police, and adults and juvenile corrections aimed at reducing inequities."

"For that to happen, COAG must provide clear expectations of the agencies involved, including reporting requirements to measure success or otherwise," Mr Slevin said.

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For the full Justice Health Conference April 9-10 2019 program go to: https://www.phaa.net.au/events/event/justice-health-conference-2019

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