



EMBARGOED UNTIL: 00.01 MONDAY 11 DECEMBER 2006

End national scandal in Indigenous health, urges open letter to Prime Minister, State Premiers, parliamentarians as well as the public in The Australian newspaper

Australia's leading health, human rights, aid and development organisations publish a full-page open letter to Prime Minister John Howard, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers, parliamentarians as well as the general public in today's (December 11) The Australian urging them to commit to a plan to achieve health equality for Indigenous peoples within 25 years.

'It is a national scandal that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live 17 years less than other Australians and that their babies die at almost three times the rate of non-Indigenous children,' said Tom Calma, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Social Justice Commissioner, a spokesperson for the group.

'In the country of 'the fair go' addressing the status of Indigenous health is one of the greatest challenges to this nation's sense of decency and fairness.'

The group is so concerned about the deepening health crisis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that they took the unusual step of placing an advertisement in the nation's national newspaper. This has enabled the group to speak with one unified voice, as well as send a powerful message to all Australians that 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.

'It is not acceptable for governments to continually state the situation is tragic and ought to be treated with urgency and then fail to put in place targets, funding and timeframes to address the issue,' said Mr Calma.

Addressing inequality in health status can be overcome. But it will require long-term action and a focused commitment. All around Australia, Indigenous communities and organisations are taking action to improve the health of their people. Their successes show that with a concerted national effort we can end Australia's Indigenous health crisis within a generation.

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

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality within 25 years will require at a minimum:

- 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.

'Addressing Australia's Indigenous health crisis should be a commitment shared by all sides of politics and all sections of Australian society. Make no mistake, the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a national shame and we stand diminished as a nation as well as individuals by ignoring the plight of our fellow Australians,' said Mr Calma.

For more information or to arrange an interview call Paul Oliver on 0408 469 347