

Article

Close the Gap – 10 years in Medical Journal of Australia Insight

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On 10 February 2016, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, organisations and representatives once again came together in Parliament house to talk about progress of the Close the Gap Campaign. This year marked 10 years of targeted efforts, policy and programs designed to Close the Gap on the unacceptable disparity in health, life and education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) would like to recognise the tireless efforts of the Close the Gap Steering Committee (CTSG) who have worked to keep the purpose and message of Close the Gap at the forefront of political discourse with successive governments. This is a long-term campaign and although we are heartened to see some progress on important indicators such as halving the gap in child mortality, and improvements for retention rates in Year 12 attainment for Indigenous students, AIDA notes there is still much work to do.

As the nations' professional association representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors, AIDA is a strong advocate for culturally safe places of education, training and professional development across the health sector. It is well known that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients are more likely to access health care and necessary follow up when they feel culturally safe and are receiving appropriate care. The launch of the *Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (2013-2023)* (Implementation Plan) in October 2015 was a significant milestone in engagement between the National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF) and the Commonwealth Government. The Implementation Plan was successfully negotiated by the NHLF across successive Governments and has bi-partisan support. AIDA calls upon the current government to continue this good work through adequate budget measures in 2016 and beyond to support the necessary workforce requirements and funding models to implement the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (2013-2023)*.

National campaigns such as Close the Gap and practical steps forward such as those articulated in the Implementation Plan are a reminder to governments on all sides of politics that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned and led approaches to health care service delivery are most likely to deliver the net gains we are all striving for. Sustainable, long-term measures that are driven at the community level have long been recognised as the most appropriate for the diverse cultural and health needs of Indigenous Australians. Too often these community-driven models are interrupted by changes of government policy, uncertain funding cycles and political ideology. Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations are most often best placed to deliver culturally and clinically appropriate health care to communities, and AIDA emphasises the importance of long-term funding certainty to enable these organisations to keep growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce and caring for community health.

It is timely to also note that improving health outcomes and enhancing well-being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians should be undertaken with a coordinated national approach. AIDA supports Indigenous-led models of service delivery but we also recognise the importance of partnership between and across governments and jurisdictions to achieve this. It is in everyone's interest to Close the Gap, and AIDA will continue to work through fora such as the NHLF and the CTSG to hold the government accountable to its commitment to support this. We welcome the sentiments of Prime Minister Turnbull's Close the Gap statement to Parliament in 2016 and recognise the underlying power and wisdom in a single sentence he shared "Do things with us not to us."