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MEDIA RELEASE

Indigenous Doctors acknowledge 30th Anniversary of the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

Today marks the 30th Anniversary of the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADC).

That Aboriginal deaths in custody continue to occur to this day – and the over-representation of our people in custody – is a national travesty. Since the report was released in 1991, over 470 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody. Notably, there have been five Indigenous deaths in custody within a month in 2021. This is an abject failure of Australian governments.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer unacceptably high levels of physical illness, mental illness and suicide. There is ample evidence that grief, stress and trauma make us sick and incidents such as ongoing deaths and over-representation – further add to the burden of health and disadvantage.

Racism and unconscious bias - institutional, systemic and individual – is an unacceptable fact of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Culturally safe services can support service providers to confront and understand cultural difference and deliver effective and safe services to our people. AIDA calls on all governments – both the federal and state/territory governments - to accept, and to address racism and unconscious biases that are embedded in police, prison, legal and health systems.

The RCIADC report addressed issues such as education, employment, poverty, housing, child removal and family violence. These social determinants of health – and of incarceration – remain as urgent today as they were in 1991. AIDA urges all governments to address these social determinants. Further, we urge governments to understand the importance of cultural determinants such as connection to language, culture and country which can strengthen our resilience as individuals, families and communities.

AIDA supports the broad range of actions which can potentially address the continuing over-representation of Aboriginal people, and deaths in custody. These include government commitment to justice reinvestment, commitment to changing laws so that young children are not sent to prison, changing mandatory laws, addressing racism and commitment to the social and cultural determinants of health and incarceration.

As doctors, AIDA is concerned that we cannot close the gap in health and wellbeing if we cannot address the failure of deaths in custody and over-representation of our people in custody.

Finally, AIDA acknowledges the pain and loss suffered by the families and communities of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have died in custody.

ENDS

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