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Gap widens between Indigenous health spending and need

The gap between what is needed to overcome Australia's Indigenous health crisis and what is actually being spent has continued to widen, a new report has revealed.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Report Card found that while there had been a significant increase in Government spending on Indigenous health since 2001-02, this had not been enough to close the gap between the shortfall and actual need.

As a result, the AMA now calculates that the gap between Indigenous health spending and need has now reached \$460 million per year.

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) National Director, Gary Highland said the AMA figures show that unless Government spending on Indigenous health was dramatically increased the nation would not close the 17 year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

"The suggestion that enough funds have been allocated to Indigenous health is a dangerous myth designed to get the Government off the hook," Mr Highland said.

"The longer we allow this myth to perpetuate, the greater the cost will be to Indigenous people and to the Australian community generally."

"Unless we fund Indigenous health properly, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health will continue to widen. If this happens, we will fail to meet the challenge issued by the Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner to end Indigenous health inequality within a generation," he said.

Mr Highland said the \$1.84 billion the AMA now considered was required over the next four years to overcome the Indigenous health shortfall was a fraction of the \$37 billion in tax cuts to be handed out during this time.

"While the Government is in surplus, Indigenous communities will remain tragically in deficit unless our funding priorities change," Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said ANTaR also endorsed the AMA's call to improve the health of Indigenous prisoners.

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“As the AMA report points out, the health status of Indigenous prisoners are appalling. Rates of substance abuse, violence, infectious and chronic diseases, and mental health problems are way above the national rates and the Indigenous community generally,” he said.

“We support the AMA’s call for jail to be a last resort for offenders with mental health or substance abuse problems,” Mr Highland said.

“The law and order auctions that pass for political debate in states like NSW do nothing for the health of Indigenous people or the well being of the community generally,” he said.

“The AMA should be congratulated for tackling this important issue in such a principled and objective way,” Mr Highland said.

For further information: <http://www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-6PU8QN>

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