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Indigenous leaders urge PM to address low vaccination among First Nations Australians

Indigenous leaders and health professionals have written to Prime Minister Scott Morrison seeking an urgent meeting about low COVID-19 vaccination rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

More than 20 leaders, including Professor Peter Yu from The Australian National University (ANU), have signed the letter, which outlines the “gravest concerns” at continuing low levels of COVID-19 vaccination in Indigenous Australian communities.



*Professor Peter Yu, Vice-President First Nations at The Australian National University.
Credit: The Australian National University*

The letter comes as a number of states, including New South Wales and Victoria, have eased COVID-19 related restrictions.

Currently more than 75 per cent of the overall Australian population aged 16 and older is fully vaccinated. In contrast, 46 per cent of Indigenous Australians have had two COVID-19 vaccine shots.

“Despite the efforts of the Aboriginal Community Controlled health sector, we have unfortunately not seen the same levels of vaccination achieved in our communities as in the wider population,” the letter reads.

The letter cites housing, access to essential supplies and a lack of sufficient health infrastructure in remote communities as key risks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

“It is evident that quarantine is currently near-impossible for those in

overcrowded housing, as well as those without ready access to food, grocery and pharmaceutical delivery services,” the signatories write.

“Moreover, rural and regional medical centres and hospitals lack the technical and human resources available in metropolitan centres and would be quickly overwhelmed if even a small number of COVID patients should require inpatient care.

“Compounding these risks are the lack of adequate capabilities to evacuate seriously ill COVID patients to locations where they can receive the care they require.”

The letter and its signatories recognise the incredible work of the First Nations community controlled health sector in helping deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

June Oscar AO, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, spoke in support of the letter and its signatories.

“To its credit, the Prime Minister’s Government and National Cabinet adopted several successful measures to protect our people at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic,” she said.

“Likewise, it was agreed by Australian governments that our communities should be a high priority for vaccines at the commencement of their rollout.

“COVID-19 presents an imminent risk to all of us, particularly our old people, and to the transmission of culture, knowledge and ceremony in our communities.

"The production and spread of misinformation about the vaccines to First Nations communities is undermining our health and our lives."

“The production and spread of misinformation about the vaccines to First Nations communities is undermining our health and our lives. We need strong collective leadership from across all sectors, community and faith-based groups to support our communities to get access to the right information and to get vaccinated.

“Catastrophe is avoidable—it will require effective and targeted measures to close the gap in vaccination rates for First Nations Australians and a commitment by Australian governments to vaccine parity before we open up the country.

“We need localised data on vaccine rates so we can understand where to target resources and substantially increase vaccination rates for all our communities across Australia.

“And we need both state and federal governments to take accountability and provide significant investment to First Nations health and community organisations so they can lead approaches that ensure the community’s safety. This includes actions like targeted campaigning, community meetings, information packs in our own languages, and a consideration of measures such as door-to-door vaccination campaigns like that currently being rolled out in Samoa.”

Professor Peter Yu, Vice-President First Nations at ANU, said he and the other signatories have been “watching in horror” as COVID spread rapidly through Indigenous communities that suffer from ongoing health and well-being issues.

“The most important thing we can do now is the development and publication of an agreed strategy between all governments, the Aboriginal Community Controlled health sector and other Indigenous experts that seeks to achieve the highest possible vaccination rates in our communities,” he said.

“It is this more than anything else that will give Indigenous leaders and their communities some assurance that our peoples can be fully involved in overcoming the existential threats that the pandemic poses to us.”

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