



The Hon Mark Butler MP
Minister for Health and Aged Care

OPINION PIECE

WHY A VOICE IS CRITICAL FOR FIRST NATIONS HEALTH

Later this year, Australians will have the chance to change our Constitution and recognise the place of First Nations people in this country.

Australians will get a chance to embrace that recognition through a voice to parliament, and I can't think of a more important area where we should listen to that voice than health.

The voice will be a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who offer advice to the parliament on issues that affect them.

We need their insights so we can improve their lives.

For too many years the parliament and health ministers of both political persuasions have been confronted with the appalling health gaps that exist

between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

There are many health challenges that unarguably impact Indigenous Australians differently, and some others that are largely unknown to non-Indigenous Australians.

Diseases like rheumatic heart disease, which was largely eradicated from developed countries more than 50 years ago, but remain common in Indigenous communities.

It is a disease of grinding poverty.

An entirely preventable disease plaguing remote communities.

Doctors in our major cities will likely never see a case of rheumatic heart disease but the rates in remote Aboriginal communities are among the highest in the world, higher even than in sub-Saharan Africa.

It is unacceptable that in a country like ours, with our world-class healthcare system, preventable diseases are allowed to flourish, where First Nations children between 5 to 15 years of age are 55 times more likely to die from rheumatic heart disease than other Australian children.

The health gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are reflected most starkly through eight fewer years of life expectancy for Indigenous Australians.

First Nations People die of kidney failure approximately 7 times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians.

Suicide rates are more than twice as high in young First Nations People compared to non-Indigenous Australians.

And while cancer deaths declined overall by 10 per cent last decade across Australia, they actually increased by 12 per cent for Indigenous Australians.

None of these shocking statistics are news.

But, with the best of intentions and with substantial investment, the current approach simply isn't working.

In the few areas where it is working, it's not working fast enough.

In health policy, there is no doubt in my mind, we need a new approach.

I am confident that a Voice to the Parliament and to the health minister will help find better, more effective, practical ways to close the gap and allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to live longer, healthier, happier lives.

This is a once in a generation opportunity to make a real difference.

And we know it will work because when you listen to people about how issues affect them, you get better results.

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