



The Royal Australasian
College of Physicians



Indigenous Health Backgrounder

Addressing the significant health gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous, for Australian Aborigine and Torres Strait Islander and New Zealand Māoris, is a critical priority of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

Despite major improvements since the 1970s, disparities in wellbeing between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous, continue to exist. In Australia, current figures suggest that Indigenous children are two to three times more likely to die before their first birthday than other Australian children, and diabetes is around 3.5 times more prevalent amongst Indigenous people compared with non-Indigenous Australians.

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders also experience higher rates of preventable illness such as heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes, while New Zealand Māoris experience higher mortality rates than the non-Māori population in cardiovascular disease, stroke, heart failure and heart disease.

The College has taken a collaborative approach, working with government, industry and the wider community to achieve better health outcomes and is a signatory of the Close the Gap campaign, initiated in 2006 by Oxfam. The Close the Gap coalition has called on governments to take action to achieve Indigenous health equality within 25 years by:

- Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' access to health services
- Addressing critical social issues such as poor housing, nutrition, employment and education
- Building Indigenous control and participation in the delivery of health and other services
- Encouraging governments at state and national levels to work in partnership with Indigenous communities, health organisations and experts to develop and monitor a plan to tackle the Indigenous health crisis

The College is actively working towards Close the Gap objectives, and has recently received a grant from the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) to continue developing its Rural Health Continuing Education program. The 'Australian Aboriginal Child Health Short Course' is an eLearning Modules project that will run over two years. This course has been developed in response to the need for improved cultural awareness in health care delivery and in understanding the role of cultural and socio economic determinants in health outcomes.

In addition to implementing the eLearning project, the College has awarded four scholarships to Indigenous medical students to attend the 2011 Congress. The College recognises the importance of developing initiatives, working with government and engaging with Indigenous communities to sustain momentum and further the Close the Gap strategy.

Cultural and financial factors and distance have been established as key barriers limiting Indigenous access to mainstream services. Improved primary care access is vital to close the gap for most health outcomes, including chronic disease, cancer mortality, infant mortality, asthma admissions and immunisation coverage. We can call do more to tackle the social determinants of health that contribute so much to these inequities.

The 2011 College Congress is a fitting and valuable opportunity to discuss these and other critical issues concerning Indigenous health.