

16 March 2023

## **Social inequity driving health disparity in NT**

**National Close the Gap Day – 16 March 2023**

Doctors working in the Northern Territory (NT) say that improving the living conditions and reinvigorating social programs hold the key to Closing the Gap in health for Aboriginal communities.

Dr Simon Quilty, a Physician formerly based at Alice Springs Hospital and currently working with Purple House, said that there was much that needed to be done outside of the health sector in order to achieve change within it.

“While there has been a lot of focus on alcohol, crime and violence in communities such as Alice Springs,” Dr Quilty said, “it is the long-term, underlying issues that are the real problem here.

“While we are definitely experiencing difficulty in attracting, retaining and housing health professionals right across the NT, addressing this issue in isolation of the greater social disparity only makes the problem worse.

“When our patients do not have adequate housing, and are living in conditions that are extremely detrimental to the health, education and basic safety of their residents, this provides fertile grounds for youth disengagement, domestic violence and social disharmony.

“There is a pervasive sense of hopelessness that is a key contributing factor to the issues affecting these communities and this has been exacerbated by the social fallout after COVID which has resulted in the cessation of many social programs that previously supported many people, particularly youth, in these communities.

“How does it look to our patients when doctors and nurses are provided with accommodation, when they are sleeping in shifts so they can fit in the increasing number of people needing basic shelter?” Dr Quilty said.

“Extreme disparity exists even within our Aboriginal health workforce. Alice Springs Hospital Aboriginal Liaison Officers, who provide interpreting services essential to the delivery of health care to our patients, are the lowest paid interpreters in the country.

“These are essential health workers, who speak many dialects, and the value of their skills must be equitable with interpreter salaries for government services for immigrants to Australia.”

In a recent meeting hosted by the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA), NT rural doctors agreed that the following programs were essential to addressing the social and health inequity suffered by their patients:

- Investment to reinvigorate youth engagement social programs
- Investment in parenting programs that are culturally appropriate
- Support and investment for community-initiated alcohol management programs



- Prioritisation for GP Infrastructure Grants for NT general practice, where the grant will result in increased service capacity
- Investment into NT Remote Housing, with homes to be designed in consultation with Community and accommodating cultural imperatives, such as social spaces for visitors and outdoor space (fire pit) for cooking and yarning
- Establishment of 'SafePlace' in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine for children to go when home situation is not safe, available between the hours of 5pm and 8am
- Increasing the remuneration for Aboriginal Liaison Officers attached to health services.

“While we discussed many ideas, we also recognise that we are a cohort of non-Indigenous doctors looking at the issues affecting our Aboriginal colleagues and patients every day. These proposed solutions should just be a starting point for engagement and consultation with community, as it is essential for the Aboriginal people affected to have a real voice in determining the policies that directly affect their lives,” Dr Quilty said.

“Once we have plans in place to address the underlying structural issues affecting Aboriginal communities, only then can we turn our attention to addressing the quality and supply of accommodation for our health professionals.

“Putting the needs of health workers so far ahead of those of the communities they serve is counter-productive, and while it may look like a band-aid fix, in reality it is undermining the health outcomes and delaying Closing the Gap.”

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**A high resolution photo of Dr Simon Quilty is available here.**

**Available for interview:** RDAA Board Member, Dr Simon Quilty (via contacts below)

**Media contacts:** Ineke Kuiper on 0408 669 638

