

Putting politics aside to 'close the gap' on Indigenous health

By Narelle Cameron

The NSW Government and State Opposition signing of the NSW 'close the gap' Statement of Intent on 3 July 2010 within the Parliamentary Chamber during sitting was a first for any state or territory and effectively recorded in Hansard.

The signing by NSW Premier, Kristina Keneally and Opposition Leader Barry O'Farrell marks a positive step towards achieving health status equality and 'closing the gap' in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

AMA (NSW) President, Dr Michael Steiner commended the move saying, "This shows a firm commitment from the NSW Government and Opposition towards closing the gap to achieve health status equality and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians by the year 2030".

"A NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is determined to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents in NSW,"

Shadow Health Minister, Jillian Skinner

NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council CEO Sandra Bailey, her Chairperson Christine Corby, Health Minister Carmel Tebbutt and Shadow Health Minister Jillian Skinner also signed the nine-point Statement of Intent to improve the lives of Indigenous people in NSW.

The Statement of Intent, signed by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and then Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson in March 2008, is a commitment

between the NSW Government and Aboriginal people to work together to achieve equality in health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians. It commits all parties to:

- Developing a comprehensive, long-term plan of action to achieve equality of health and life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians by 2030;
- Ensuring primary healthcare services and health infrastructure are capable of bridging the gap in health standards by 2018;
- Ensuring full participation of Aboriginal Australians in addressing their health needs;
- Working together to address the social determinants that impact health equality for Aboriginal Australians;
- Building on the evidence base and supporting what works in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and relevant international experience;
- Supporting and developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health services in urban, rural and remote areas;
- Achieving improved access to, and outcomes from, mainstream services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- Respect and promote the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including by ensuring health services are available, appropriate, accessible, affordable and of good quality; and
- Measure, monitor, and report on our joint efforts, in accordance with benchmarks and targets, to ensure we are progressively realising our shared ambitions.

Dr Steiner said this was an important step since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the poorest health of any group of people living

in Australia. The facts are they can expect to live substantially shorter lives than other Australians. Babies born to Aboriginal mothers die at twice the rate of other Australian babies and experience higher rates of preventable illness such as heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes.

“This partnership allows us to work closer with Aboriginal communities at the State, regional and local levels to meet the targets set by COAG and achieve real change. I look forward to working with the Leader of the Opposition, Barry O’Farrell, and political leaders across the country – together it will be possible to achieve real outcomes.”

NSW Premier, Kristina Keneally

“Over the years medical advances have brought improvements to the health of Australians yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not shared these gains equally. The 10-17 year life expectancy gap is unacceptable. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples deserve access to quality medical services where and when they need them.

“We encourage NSW doctors to join in the ‘close the gap’ efforts to ensure that by 2030 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children born in Australia have the same opportunities as other Australian children to live long, happy and healthy lives,” Dr Steiner said.

“The commitments by the Premier

and Opposition Leader are particularly important because NSW has the largest population of Aboriginal people in Australia,” Ms Bailey said, cautioning that “the signing of the Statement of Intent is relatively easy; it’s the work that needs to be done to close the gap in Aboriginal health that will need to stand the test of time and we look forward to working with all sides of politics in NSW to achieve the best outcomes possible for our people”.

The ‘close the gap’ campaign is Australia’s largest-ever campaign to improve indigenous health by: increasing Indigenous people’s access to health services; addressing social issues such as poor housing, nutrition, employment and education; building Indigenous control and participation in the delivery of health and other services; and getting governments at state and national level to work together with Indigenous communities, health organisations and experts to develop and monitor a plan to tackle the crisis.

The campaign has attracted immense public support since its launch in April 2007 with more than 135,000 Australians signing the pledge and thousands of letters to Federal Government demanding action, effectively fuelling a political shift in tackling the health crisis.

