

MEDIA RELEASE

AMSANT welcomes *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*

7 February 2024

The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) today welcomed the release of the Australian Government Productivity Commission's *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

AMSANT CEO, Dr John Paterson, said: "The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* was signed in 2020 by all Australian Governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. It is the formally agreed foundation to address the poor health, poverty and discrimination that our people continue to suffer due to the historical and continuing processes of colonisation."

"Unfortunately, the Productivity Commission's first review of the Agreement shows, that all too often, governments are not delivering on their commitments."

Dr Paterson said that in the Northern Territory there had been some positive changes in health outcomes for Aboriginal people over the last twenty-five years.

"We have seen [life expectancy](#) for our men increase by 9 years between 1999 and 2018, and by about 5 years for our women over the same period. These positive changes have been driven by better health services, particularly by expanded primary health care delivered by our Aboriginal community controlled health services. We commend those governments and their departments that have listened to us and supported these positive changes."

However, Dr Paterson sounded a note of caution: "The health gap is closing in the Northern Territory, but too slowly. Our people are still living their lives much sicker and dying much earlier than non-Indigenous Territorians. More needs to be done."

He also warned that further progress in improving health status requires some of the drivers of ill-health – such as poverty, inequality, poor housing, and poor education – to be taken much more seriously by government.

"Unfortunately, even the partial progress we have seen in the health system has not been matched in other sectors," he said.

“In remote communities in particular, [poverty](#) is increasing and inequality widening. Our [education system](#) is underfunded and failing in its basic duty to support our kids to be literate and numerate. The government’s own figures show soaring [homelessness](#) rates for our people, driven by inadequate, poorly maintained and overcrowded housing.”

“Governments need to properly engage with our communities and organisations to address these issues, and that process of engagement needs to be resourced to allow Aboriginal voices to be heard,” said Dr Paterson.

Dr Paterson urged all governments to carefully consider the recommendations contained in the Productivity Commission’s *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap* which are based around four key themes:

1. sharing power with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations
2. recognising and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty
3. rethinking mainstream systems and culture
4. stronger accountability to drive behaviour change, including the establishment of an independent mechanism to monitor and report on progress.

“An independent mechanism overseeing progress towards Closing the Gap is a key priority. There needs to be a driver for change that reflects more than the goodwill of governments,” Dr Paterson said.

“The Commissioners have consulted widely and done a great job in analysing and presenting a huge amount of information. I have no doubt the Review will make uncomfortable reading for some in government. However, I ask them to take the criticisms on board, to hear those Aboriginal voices in the Review, and to focus on the Review’s practical and achievable list of recommendations.”

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