

28 June 2007

NT child protection plan needs medical workforce trained in Indigenous health

A medical workforce that is culturally competent in Indigenous health is essential if the Federal Government's plan to address child abuse in remote Aboriginal communities is to succeed, the body representing Australia's medical deans has advised.

In response to the Little Children Are Sacred report, commissioned by the Northern Territory government, the Federal Government has announced measures in which doctors and other health care workers will play a critical role.

Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand President Professor Allan Carmichael said the successful implementation of this would require many more doctors equipped with the cultural awareness needed to operate effectively in Aboriginal communities.

"At present there are about 90 Indigenous doctors in Australia but the number required is far above this," Professor Carmichael said. "There are about 100 in training at the moment and Medical Deans, through the university medical schools, are also proactively training non-Indigenous medical students in cultural safety and awareness."

Medical Deans has worked with the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association to develop a curriculum framework that addresses Indigenous health issues.

The framework is accredited by the Australian Medical Council and is implemented in all Australian medical schools.

"This curriculum is an investment in the future of not only the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, but the training of a more competent medical workforce, and an improvement in the health status of all Australians," Professor Carmichael said.

"A long term strategy is needed to address child abuse in Indigenous communities and the Medical Deans are dedicated to improving the workforce capacity in Indigenous health which will be necessary for such a strategy to succeed."

Professor Ian Anderson, a member of Medical Deans' Indigenous Health Curriculum Steering Committee, director of the Centre for Health and Society and director of the Onemda VicHealth Koori Health Unit at the University of Melbourne, said to provide appropriate care to Indigenous people, strategies to address child abuse needed to be based on sound evidence.

"Any intervention in this difficult area should be not only evidence based, but grounded in best practice and culturally safe," Professor Anderson said.

"Rolling out a plan which includes well-health checks for children needs to take account of current workforce capacity and the time that is needed to turn the workforce around."

Areas covered in the Indigenous Health Curriculum Framework include ensuring that the people and systems delivering health care are aware of the impact of their own culture and cultural values on the delivery of services and that they have some knowledge of, and sensitivity towards, the cultural needs of others.

For further information contact:

Professor Allan Carmichael on a.carmichael@utas.edu.au, 03 6226 4860

Professor Ian Anderson on i.anderson@unimelb.edu.au, 03 8344 0825.