

JOINT MEDIA RELEASE: Medical Australia and New Zealand/ Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
Agreement to raise Indigenous doctor numbers and improve Indigenous health
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There is an urgent need for more Indigenous doctors in Australia to help improve life expectancy and reduce infant mortality rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, a need that will tomorrow (Saturday 4 October) see Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand and the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) sign a collaborative agreement.

The President of Medical Deans Australia and New Zealand Professor Allan Carmichael and AIDA President Dr Tamara Mackean said underpinning the agreement was the need to recruit and retain Indigenous doctors as well as non-Indigenous doctors equipped with the cultural awareness needed to work effectively in Aboriginal communities.

"Indigenous doctors make a significant and unique contribution towards the health of Indigenous people and communities," Professor Carmichael said. "At present there are about 125 Indigenous doctors in Australia but the number required is far above this. Last year, 12 Indigenous doctors graduated from Australian universities and there are currently 129 in training. Medical Deans, through the university medical schools, is also proactively training non-Indigenous medical students in cultural safety and awareness."

The collaborative agreement aims to increase the recruitment, support, retention and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students and implement the Medical Deans' Indigenous Health Curriculum Framework. Dr Mackean said the agreement was significant as it reflected the necessary commitment to create substantial change.

The curriculum framework was developed by the Medical Deans and AIDA over the lifespan of their previous agreement, which expires at the end of this year. The Indigenous Health Curriculum Framework is accredited by the Australian Medical Council and is being implemented in all Australian medical schools.

Areas covered in the curriculum framework include ensuring that the people and systems delivering healthcare 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.

"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.

Beth Kervin, an Indigenous medical student at the University of New South Wales, said knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture was vital for doctors working with Indigenous people as they helped explain why Aboriginal health is poor today.

"Since Aboriginal health is such an important issue in Australia and will continue to be until we close the gap (on life expectancy of Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians) it is important people are enthusiastic about making a difference," Ms Kervin, a fifth-year student, said. "If people in Aboriginal health are culturally ignorant, the quality of the health care they are able to provide won't be sufficient."

Ms Kervin, who was raised in south-west Sydney, said she would like to work in rural Aboriginal communities after graduating. "I hope to work as a paediatrician and help improve some of our infant mortality rates, that's important to me."

The Collaboration Agreement will be signed at the 2008 AIDA Symposium in Darwin. It commits AIDA and the Medical Deans to working together on a *Program of Collaboration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equality* and covers the period 2008-2011.

Dr Mackean stressed that the work doesn't end at the undergraduate level. Drawing on the concept of the collaboration between AIDA and the Medical Deans; the Committee of Presidents of Medical Colleges has embarked on a process to not only increase Indigenous medical specialists but to also integrate Indigenous health education across various training programs.

Medical student Beth Kervin and Medical Deans Chair Professor Allan Carmichael are available for interview. To arrange an interview contact Penny Fannin on 0417 125 700.

To arrange an interview with AIDA President Dr Tamara Mackean, please contact Dewi Zulkefli on 0423 306 381.