

Andrew Hewett Speech
Perth, 23 and 24 July 2007

"Close the Gap: solutions need more than just a quick fix"

Photo Exhibition launch

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Perth, Western Australia

(3039 words)

Let me begin by paying my respect to the traditional owners and custodians of this country. To acknowledge the generous spirit in which they have shared this space and their culture for many years and to celebrate with them their vibrant ongoing culture.

This exhibition highlights and celebrates some of the good news stories which are usually absent from public debate about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country.

It stands in sharp contrast to the demonising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures that is so common at present. It is a demonizing that gets played out regularly in the media and is unfortunately preferred by our most prominent political figures.

Today I want to talk about the Close the gap campaign - explaining what we are trying to achieve and why it is so important.

But first, I should explain why Oxfam is involved in such a campaign for though we have supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations for more than 30 years, Oxfam is best known as a non-Indigenous, international development agency. So what is our place in the Indigenous health debate?

Firstly, we believe the current state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in this nation demands a response from every Australian, not just those whom it affects directly. The fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to die 17 years earlier than other Australians demands a nationwide political response.

The second reason for Oxfam's involvement in this campaign is founded on our assessment of what is required to elicit political change. For many years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have tirelessly called for the political leadership required to turn the health crisis around. Yet, 40 years after the 1967 referendum when 90 per cent of Australians voted in support of equal rights for Aboriginal peoples, a stark inequality in health status remains.

Fortunately things do not seem to have gone backwards. As the recent Menzies School of Health Research report demonstrates, important gains have been made and Aboriginal life expectancy in the Northern Territory, for example, has increased. But so has the life expectancy of Australians, generally – so the inequality gap between Aboriginal and other Australians remains.

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Moreover, given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up just 3 per cent of the Australian population, it is obvious that additional voices are needed to achieve substantial change. Put simply, there must be a strong non-Indigenous response to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health crisis.

Importantly, Oxfam does not see its role as providing detailed policy proposals to solve the Indigenous health crisis. These must come from all health organisations, Indigenous and non Indigenous. But the effort must be led by Indigenous people and our role at Oxfam is to help create the political space in which those organisations can lead.

Finally, Oxfam adopts a rights-based approach to community development. We believe everyone has the right to essential services, such as health, education, water and sanitation; they also have the right to an effective voice in decisions affecting them and the right to equality regardless of race, gender or any other discriminatory ground.

And as the UN declaration on Indigenous rights states the original custodians of this land have special rights in that capacity. Oxfam believes that these rights need to be the starting point in these sorts of debates.

It would be inconsistent if Oxfam were to advocate for the realisation of human rights outside Australia while ignoring the ongoing struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights here at home.

This brings me to the current rights and responsibilities debate that has been prominent in the last month or so. Let me be frank and perhaps a little provocative – I find this debate unhelpful because I believe it creates a false dichotomy. By focusing solely on rights and responsibilities the debate fails to give sufficient attention to the social determinants of poor health or the fact that most of the health conditions prevalent among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are diseases of poverty. It also focuses very much on the responsibilities of one group of people and not on the responsibilities of broader governments and all Australians.

It also fails to draw from the critical lessons of successful public health strategies or inspire creativity or innovation in developing new strategies. Take anti-smoking campaigns, for example. No amount of evangelizing about the responsibility of smokers to quit would have produced the dramatic reduction in the number of smokers we have witnessed in the last decade.

On the contrary, anti-smoking strategies appear to be founded on the recognition that individuals have the freedom to make their own choice about smoking. Widespread and graphic public education campaigns have equipped people to make informed choices about the implications of taking up or quitting smoking, while support services and help lines have been made available to assist after the decision to quit has been made.

Another useful example is the OPAL initiative which has had a significant impact in reducing the incidence of petrol sniffing in Central Australia. Rather than preaching about the responsibility of Aboriginal people to stop or discourage petrol sniffing, the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLIS) proposed an innovative solution involving the replacement of petrol with non-sniffable OPAL fuel. This initiative gained the support of other non-government organisations and, ultimately – after a compelling

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cost-benefit analysis (!) – The Government. Significantly, it also received support from British Petroleum.

This is not only an example of an innovative solution for what could have seemed a hopeless situation but also an example of just what can be achieved when Indigenous and other non-government organisations, governments and business decide to work together.

It is important to note here that the Federal Government initiative in the Northern Territory, while offering emergency relief in the face of a devastating social problem, will not succeed unless the underlying causes are dealt with and alternative programs are set in place, for the long term.

This brings me to the Close the Gap campaign. The campaign asks for immediate action with long term commitment in indigenous Health. It was shaped and first proposed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, in his 2005 Social Justice Report. This report, provided to government every year, involves a monitoring of government programs in relation to our obligations to human rights. The 2005 report asked Australian governments to commit to achieving equality of health status and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people within 25 years.

The campaign to achieve this goal has now been endorsed by 36 diverse organisations across Australia, as detailed in an open letter published in The Australian late last year. Key organisations participating in the planning of this campaign have included NACCHO, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the Australian Medical Association, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, the Australian General Practitioners Network, the Fred Hollows Foundation and Ian Thorpe's Foundation for Youth, to name a few.

Close the Gap stresses three critical and inter-related ingredients to tackling health inequality:

- Resources - we cannot shy away from the fact that more resources, more dollars are required
- Indigenous leadership - indigenous people need to be in the driver's seat, helping to shape and implement the required programs
- It's more than health - achieving improvements in health outcomes requires improvements in the social determinants of health - housing, education, employment and the like.

Since the campaign's launch we have had many organisations and individuals sign up to a petition to help Close the Gap. Many of you would have seen Catherine Freeman and Ian Thorpe launch the Close the Gap Campaign earlier this year. This has led to over 80,000 other Australians also signing their commitment to wanting real and lasting change.

So what has happened since the campaign was launched? As you will probably know a critical component of the campaign calls for the Federal Government to immediately adjust the underspend in Primary Health Care. This figure originally identified by Access

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Economics in 2000 as \$400 million every year is estimated by the AMA to now be an underspend of \$460 million. This is money not going to desperately needed Indigenous communities.

In May of this year a new Federal budget was announced. The budget process saw intensive lobbying by many in the campaign and many other concerned activists. Despite the high profile of the issue and the clarity of the call to action, the budget delivered a disappointing \$30 million dollar increase in primary health care. Only 13% of what was needed.

This chronic under funding exemplifies how Indigenous Affairs has been supported in this country for well over 30 years. Indigenous Health and broader Indigenous welfare have been in crisis for a long time.

Now after many years and numerous reports and calls for action from Aboriginal leaders for governments to act, the political will has finally been offered. It has happened through what is being called the Northern Territory intervention or 'national emergency' to use the Prime Minister's term. The political will and commitment by Government to this initiative has been overwhelmingly supported, however the implementation appears to be where some areas of significant concern are raised.

To be clear Oxfam welcomes the high level national attention being paid to the critical issue of Indigenous people's well-being. But we have some serious concerns about *how* this issue is being addressed.

The stakes are high. Given the very high public expectations that have been created, the Government cannot afford to get it wrong. It may be that without sacrificing the need for demonstrate urgency, that there is case for making haste slowly.

Oxfam, along with many other organisations, has raised concern about centrally run, imposed solutions. As a development agency, we know from long experience here and overseas that all evidence points to success being contingent on communities being central to action, and being equal and empowered to take control of their solutions. We are also concerned that the Acton so far also fails to acknowledge the hard work being done (on limited resource) already in many of the affected communities.

The report which has galvanized the Australian Government into action goes beyond documenting the current reality and offers hope for the future - hope and practical solutions through its 97 recommendations. The Prime Minister's recent announcement - and the enormous public debate it has generated - responds to only a handful of the 97 recommendations made by Rex Wild and Pat Anderson in their report. It might also be pertinent to mention here that changes to the ALRA or land tenure in general was never proposed in this or any other report as a contributing factor in the perpetration of abuse against children.

One of the reasons offered by the Minister for not having community engagement in the initiative is that, in his words, 'the time for talking is over' and that the time for proper consultation with affected communities is not possible "when children are being hurt tonight". The suggestion that Indigenous and other voices are only interested in delaying action and more talk is demeaning. By stark contrast, a coalition of over 40 Aboriginal

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organisations in the Northern Territory were able, in just two weeks, to produce a strong and practical blueprint for action now.

The blueprint offers comprehensive and well thought out solutions and actions. It was developed by the many under resourced community programs and organisations that have, over many years, been achieving outcomes for their communities in the NT. It was build directly on the 97 recommendations of the Children are Sacred Report and the litany of other report recommendations that deal with the disadvantage of Indigenous peoples in those communities. The blueprint has now been sitting with Government for over two weeks.

The plan acknowledges the Government's action on this issue to date and includes a two-stage response to the problem of child abuse in remote Aboriginal communities. It comprises; an emergency response over the next three to six months to protect children from immediate harm; and a more comprehensive long term plan designed to achieve sustainable outcomes. This long term plan deals with the critical broader, underlying issues in health, housing and education.

The Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations blueprint outlines over 50 practical and proven actions, which can begin to be put in place within the coming months.

This comprehensive plan was pulled together by organisations that know the solutions and have been waiting for the opportunity and political backing to put them into action.

In a recent market research paper that Oxfam commission it was identified that Australians genuinely want to see things change for their fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens. They are willing to spend what it takes to make it happen but it they want the funds be spent properly on things that will work and not frittered away on reinventing the wheel, unproven and unrelated ideological 'solutions'..

We have that now with the proposal of the CAO of the NT. Oxfam in the past few weeks has been calling on our supporters to lobby parliamentarians while they are here in their home offices during the winter recess of parliament. We want supporters to send the letters and make the phone calls to pressure the government to endorse the positive blueprint now. We are asking for the exact same endorsement from all political parties, all governments.

One issue that I do want to raise specifically in this context is the issue of changes to the Aboriginal Land Rights Act. I raise this because the proposed changes put forward by the Government have serious ramifications for the cultural survival of Aboriginal people in the affected areas. We are clear that there is absolutely no reason that land tenure should be a plank of the governments proposed reform. It is important to note that these proposed changes to land tenure have been a part of this government's platform for reform of land rights from as far back as 1998 when QC John Reeves, a member of the NT taskforce, proposed them. This proposition has nothing to do with child abuse and has never before been linked to child abuse.

Two things are being proposed – compulsory acquisition of land leases for communities over 100 people for 5 years and payment of compensation for the use of that land.

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We and the CAO argue that this is not necessary because arrangements to better communities can already be accommodated under the current provisions of the ALRA. All that would need to happen is that land councils provide the head leases necessary to provide for the public housing initiatives. This is something that is already underway through the central land council and NT Government.

Quite aside from winding back the inherent rights of Aboriginal people the tenure provisions are a clear waste of money. Why spend all that money on changes to the ALRA and in compulsory compensation payments when it is clear it can be done under existing provisions of the Act. Most importantly this allows for more money to go directly to fixing the housing problems immediately. And this is exactly they type of money wasting that Australians have been complaining about in Indigenous Affairs.

Oxfam has been calling for the exercise of political will and adequate funding to close the gap in Indigenous Health. However what we may have omitted to say – because we didn't think we needed to, was that this MUST be done in a way that respects the rights and the dignity of Aboriginal Australians. Solutions can be done within a rights framework. And why would we choose not to do so if we can. It is possible to resolve the problems AND empower the people.

I believe the vast majority of Australians want visionary leadership that will support innovative solutions to the challenges. People want to move forward rather than continue to feel uncomfortable about the conflicts and inaction. Based on our research, there appears to be no begrudging in the broader community of increased funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, provided the money is spent effectively and achieves desired outcomes.

Moreover, in the market research, Australians overwhelmingly supported Aboriginal history and culture being taught in all Australian schools. Many Australians are at a loss as to what to do but desperately want things to change.

In the coming weeks and months you will be asked to vote with your feet, hands and most importantly hearts on these issues.

On September 18 Oxfam, with some of our allies, will be calling on all Australians to commit their public support for Closing the Gap in indigenous life expectancy and life quality. We will do this through major public actions all across Australian. It will provide, in an election year, an opportunity for Australians to let the decision makers and the Australian Community know that we feel this issue is of the highest order. It will also provide the opportunity for us, as non Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, to demonstrate to indigenous people that we also think it is possible to close the gap.

So join with us by demonstrating your own individual action together with action in your family and work place. Demonstrate your active citizenship again. Demonstrate, in the words of our recent billboard, your belief that 'Indigenous Health needs more than just a quick fix'.

We can Close the Gap on life expectancy of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within a generation. At a time when the Political will appears at long last to be available, lets make sure that the long term as well as the immediate investment is put in

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place to make it work. This is about achieving the best that Australia can be. This is about believing that people can be and want to be great. This is about realising that Aboriginal people, like all people, deserve dignity and that, with vision, true support and in a spirit of 'standing along side' – not in front – the goals can be achieved.

On the weekend the movie the Shawshank Redemption was playing on local television. In this movie the character Andy reminds his friend Red, at time when he most needed it, that 'hope is a great thing. Maybe the best of things'.

Anyone watching this movie can be excused for thinking it is a movie about the redemption of a crime committed. That is not how I saw it. I saw it as the redemption of a man who had lost hope. A man who thought he could no longer afford to hope. His redemption is to once again have hope restored into his life. It offered the belief that he is worthy of dreaming and wanting a good place in life. It acknowledges that without this, life's journey is a lonely one. In this movie Red borrows some of his friends hope until he is in a position to realise his own.

Now is the perfect time for us as Australians to be supporting a solution that offers both practical measures and hope.

Thank you.