Rugby League tackles Indigenous health crisis

By Tom Calma

When Jamie Soward became the first player to pass 200 points in last year’s NRL Premiership, he signalled a reminder of just how prominent Aboriginal players are in rugby league.

Three of the top five point scorers in last year’s premiership are Aboriginal – Soward, Johnathan Thurston and Scott Prince.

Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are less than three percent of Australia’s population, they make up more than 11 percent of current NRL players.

However, while Aboriginal players are among the NRL’s brightest stars, the situation for our people off the field is vastly different.

Australia is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet on average an Aboriginal child born today will still live for more than a decade less than a non-Aboriginal child. Aboriginal babies are up to three times more likely to die before the age of one than other Australian babies and Aboriginal people face much higher risks of diabetes, heart disease, cancer and kidney failure.

The success of its Indigenous stars has prompted the NRL to dedicate an annual round of matches to closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and other Australians.

In doing so, rugby league became the first sporting code in Australia to join Close the Gap, the nation’s largest ever campaign to improve Indigenous health.

The aim of the campaign is to close the gap in Aboriginal life expectancy within a generation – by the year 2030.

There are a number of ways that the NRL’s involvement can help achieve this.

The first is by highlighting that Aboriginal achievement is not just restricted to the sporting field. Although the success of our Indigenous rugby league champions is well known, the work of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health champions often takes place out of the spotlight. It’s a little known fact that there are more than 100 Indigenous doctors practicing around Australia.

In addition, many Aboriginal Medical Services are world class. Just last year the Tharawal Aboriginal Medical Service in Sydney’s west beat many mainstream services to win the Royal Australian College of Physicians’ National General Practice of the Year Award.
One of the reasons Close the Gap wanted to involve rugby league is that the popularity of the game will ensure our message reaches new and larger audiences than ever before. We know we have to keep this issue front and centre in politicians’ minds for the many years ahead that it will take to achieve Indigenous health equality. In order to do this, we must take mainstream Australia with us. We need people to ask the question, “why?”, when they hear or read about Indigenous inequality statistics.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are passionate about the game in their many thousands, rugby league can send a reminder about aspects of our own behaviour which will need to change if we’re to Close the Gap. It can encourage our men to have regular health checks, our women to undergo breast screening and cervical checks and our children to learn about healthy eating and lifestyle strategies.

Rugby League also embodies the kind of partnerships essential to closing the gap. Every week in the NRL, Indigenous and non-Indigenous players come together successfully to achieve a common goal.

Although the Federal, State and Territory governments have signed up to the aims of our campaign and have devoted much needed funding to tackle the problem, they can learn from rugby league when it comes to adopting a partnership approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A detailed, generational plan of action is also needed to close the gap.

Rugby league has a long history of achievement when it comes to Aboriginal participation in the game. By joining the Close the Gap Campaign it can use its immense reach and influence to achieve even more – ensuring that Aboriginal children have the same life chances as other Australian children by the year 2030.

*Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma is the founder and Co-Chair of the Close the Gap campaign steering committee.*