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Helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to better health

Improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remains one of the most pressing and difficult health and social issues.

Experience has shown that the best way to improve outcomes is to work with Indigenous communities to identify and address the unique needs of their people. The government is fully committed to building the capacity of the health system and of local communities to achieve this end.

Additional resources are provided in this Budget. But getting better results also requires new approaches recognising the complexities of providing a sustainable service to high need Indigenous populations.

These include both disadvantaged urban people and those in rural and remote settings which lack the infrastructure, employment and other opportunities which many Australians take for granted. The Budget measures reflect this need.

Improved Primary Health Care

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to GPs and other primary health care services across Australia will be further improved through the allocation of an additional \$40.0 million over the next four years.

This funding will enable the establishment of four new primary health care clinics in communities where they are not currently available, and provide the primary health care professionals needed to staff them. The funding will also be used to strengthen established clinics to meet the health needs in communities where services are currently very limited. Strengthening health services will also provide a broader base that will support other new targeted health initiatives such as the *Healthy for Life* program being funded in this Budget.

The main focus of these additional resources will be in rural and remote areas and will help to meet the current shortfall of health professionals in remote Indigenous services by funding 50 additional GPs, nurses and Aboriginal Health Workers by the fourth year of this initiative.

Healthy for Life program

This new program will support immediate improvement in the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers, babies and children and reduce, over time, the impact of chronic diseases which are very common among Indigenous people.

The *Healthy for Life* program will receive \$102.4 million over four years from 2005-06. Its systematic approach to providing a healthy start in life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will be an important step in breaking the cycle of poor health into adulthood.



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By improving access to early and regular ante-natal and child health care, the program will result in improved birth weights and fewer health problems requiring doctor or hospital treatment for infants and young children.

Increased screening and treatment for chronic diseases in adults will mean earlier identification and initiation of treatment to prevent progression of the disease and the development of complications such as end stage renal disease.

The program also includes scholarships to increase the number of Indigenous Australians trained as health professionals. This will help build the skills base in Indigenous communities to improve the performance of local health services and also provide opportunities for employment and careers for local people.

Combating Petrol Sniffing

Petrol sniffing which can cause permanent brain damage is a major problem among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in many communities.

The Comgas Scheme presently assists 37 communities by providing fuel which is not "sniffable".

An additional \$9.6 million over four years from 2005-06 has been allocated to provide this fuel to a further 23 communities.

The fuel used in the scheme will also be changed. A new fuel, known as Opal and developed by BP will replace Avgas. Opal is a better alternative fuel than Avgas as it does not contain lead and has very low levels of the aromatic hydrocarbons which give the "high" sought by petrol sniffers.

The additional funding will also allow trials of regional specific approaches to reduce petrol sniffing in two trial sites chosen by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). This will help inform future planning to combat petrol sniffing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Reduction in petrol sniffing will make a major contribution to whole-of-government efforts to reduce the impact of substance abuse and secure better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hearing services

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will get greater access to Australian Government Hearing Services through new funding of \$10.1 million over the four years commencing from 2005-06.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over, and those taking part in the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) will now be eligible for Australian Government Hearing Services assistance. This includes free hearing checks, rehabilitation, and provision of free hearing devices.



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The measure will assist an estimated 10,000 additional Indigenous Australians suffering from hearing loss, over the next four years.

Hearing problems can be a major barrier to workforce participation. In 2002, one in four Indigenous Australians who were in work, were in the CDEP program. Addressing hearing problems by extending access to hearing services for CDEP participants will assist these individuals to more fully participate in the program and to secure ongoing employment.

The new measure will come into effect on 1 December 2005.

Indigenous communities' drug and alcohol initiatives

The Australian Government has provided additional funds of \$8.0 million over four years from 2005-06 to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities deal with problems faced by drugs and alcohol. The funding will be provided in consultation with the Australian National Council on Drugs and The Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs. For example, funding could be used to develop culturally appropriate health promotion materials.

Fringe Benefit Tax supplementation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations

The Australian Government has reaffirmed its commitment to assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to retain professional staff through the continuance of its Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) supplementation program.

Funding of \$59.7 million will be provided over four years to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations which provide health, housing, employment, educational and legal services to assist them with overcoming the disadvantages they face in attracting and retaining professional staff, especially to remote areas of Australia. Of this amount \$32.8 million is for Indigenous health services.

The funding is a recommitment to the program introduced by the Australian Government in April 2001. Over the past four years Indigenous organisations have been able to maintain staff in over 1,400 positions.

Continuing FBT supplementation will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, especially those in rural and remote areas, are able to retain doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers and competent and experienced administration and management professionals.