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World Health Organisation slams Aboriginal health

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The health of Aborigines lags a century behind other Australians, according to a new World Health Organisation report which condemns the Government's failure to apologise for the past.

The report analyses the health status of indigenous people in both Australia and New Zealand, painting a far poorer picture on this side of the Tasman.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have significantly worse outcomes than their fellow countrymen on every indicator of health, according to the WHO paper.

In New Zealand, while inequality exists between Maori and non-Maori the gaps were fewer, smaller and closing, it said.

"Unfortunately we can't say the same here," co-author from the University of NSW Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit Lisa Jackson Pulver said.

The report said indigenous Australians were dogged by health problems which had not affected others for years.

"Leprosy, rheumatic heart disease and tuberculosis haven't been experienced in white populations for decades but they are still problems for some indigenous communities," the report states.

"On many indicators, our health now remains unacceptably lower and at levels experienced nearly a century ago by our non-indigenous peers."

At the root of the problem is the Commonwealth's failure to acknowledge its role in the inequality, according to the report which will be presented at the WHO's Commission on the Social Determinants of Indigenous Health meeting in Adelaide today.

The authors say public acceptance of the stance that colonisation stripped Aboriginal people of their rights is needed before they can move forward.

"Prime Minister [John] Howard refers to the recognition of past wrongs as the black-armband view of history for which he is unwilling to say sorry," the report says.

"However, to see the acknowledgement of past wrongs as symbolic fails to acknowledge the profound psychological impacts that these past and current wrongs have on

Aboriginal people's sense of identity and our capacity to actively participate in Australian society."

The paper, to be presented in Geneva in June, includes life expectancy as the strongest indicator of poor health, with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders dying almost 20 years younger than most other Australians.

There were also greater levels of ill health, which led to higher levels of disability, lower quality of life and high rates of dangerous behaviour such as smoking and substance abuse.

The paper identified Australia as the worst of the wealthy nations when it came to indigenous health.

High-profile Australians, including Cathy Freeman and Ian Thorpe, launched the Close the Gap campaign in Sydney earlier this month to put an end to health discrimination.

AAP