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\$10 Billion Health Fund must be used to close Indigenous health gap

A significant portion of the \$10 billion Nation Building Health Fund announced by the Treasurer last night should be earmarked for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health care, according to Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR).

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland said the lack of sufficient funding for Aboriginal primary health care in last night's budget made it essential to draw on the new fund if the Government was to achieve its aim of closing the 17 year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

"Australia's single biggest health infrastructure investment should be used to overcome the nation's single biggest health challenge – the appalling 17 year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people," Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said that the policy settings for Indigenous affairs in last night's budget were sound, with clear, measurable targets and a commitment to working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"However, I'm fearful that there is not sufficient funding to key areas in this year's budget to achieve the government's aims," he said.

Mr Highland said it was pleasing to see that the government had honoured its commitments to fund Aboriginal child and maternal health services, early literacy and numeracy programs, real jobs for Aboriginal rangers, improvements to the Indigenous health workforce and measures to tackle smoking in Aboriginal communities.

However, the budget did not include the much needed significant increase in funds to primary health care that every health expert in the country says is essential to closing the gap.

The Ministerial budget statement on closing the gap commits the government to "improving the access of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to comprehensive primary health care services. ... Evidence from Australia and overseas shows that improved access to comprehensive primary health care can make a real and sustainable difference to overall health in the longer term."

However, Mr Highland said that funding allocations in the budget to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health sector and other primary health care providers did not appear to match the government's rhetoric.

"In light of this omission, ANTaR urges the Government to expand the terms of its Health Nation Building Fund to include building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health care services in addition to the support for hospitals and medical research announced by the Treasurer," Mr Highland said.

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