

**Submission
No 64**

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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**Submission to the
Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues:
Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in New South
Wales**

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1. Introduction

In February 2008, the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sydney secured a \$10 million dollar donation from businessman and philanthropist, Mr Greg Poche, to establish a Centre for Indigenous Health.

The money was donated based on a proposal developed by senior members of the Faculty and led by the Dean, Professor Bruce Robinson. The Faculty, with considerable support across the University, wished to establish the Centre such that it made a practical and immediate contribution to improving the health of Indigenous people. The longer term goal is that the Centre's education and research programs will increase the nation's capacity to better address the poor state of Indigenous health.

2. Centre for Indigenous Health: Funded Activities

- **Clinics**

Commencing in mid-2008, the Centre will commence operation of outreach clinics to fill gaps in health services in towns in western New South Wales. The clinics will initially be in Brewarrina and Bourke, extending to Broken Hill and Dubbo, shortly after. They will be attended primarily by members of the University from a range of health professions, including specialist doctors, nurses, diabetes educators and more. An active register of medical and allied health specialists will supply the necessary skills to provide a highly organised and regular program of outreach clinics. The Faculty is able to call upon its large membership to provide medical skills and there is also strong interest from other health faculties in participation. The Royal Flying Doctor Service is a partner in clinic delivery and will provide all transport.

- **Education**

Medical and other health students will participate in the outreach clinics, experiencing the challenges of Indigenous health care. With current funding, 25% of medical students will gain intensive Indigenous experience. As the program expands, students in other health professions, including dentistry, nursing, physiotherapy and more, will also have opportunities for participate in the clinics and gain greater exposure to Indigenous communities.

- **Research**

The Centre has funding for several senior academic appointments, and positions were advertised in February and March 2008. It will undertake medical and social

health research, including program evaluations, which will be widely available and able to guide future decisions.

3. Expansion

Following extensive consultations with Indigenous groups (particularly in western NSW), with health service providers, and within the University, further specific needs have been identified. If funds can be secured, the Centre for Indigenous Health is considering expansion in a number of areas.

- **Increased Clinics**

The Centre has a scaleable model for delivery of health services to remote and regional communities. In western NSW, representatives from Indigenous and local communities outside of the four selected towns have approached the Faculty to ask about the Centre's clinic program. The Centre is hoping to expand its provision of medical specialist support in the Northern Territory, and is currently discussing options.

- **Prevention I - Education**

The Faculty's School of Rural Health has been supporting a small number of educational programs in schools in Dubbo and Broken Hill, with the purpose of encouraging young Indigenous people to continue with their education, to work towards career goals (including in health care) and adopt healthy lifestyles. A problem is that current funding for programs is typically only secured for short periods, which limits the ability of staff to make long term plans and contributes to cynicism among students and their families. The Centre would like to secure long term funding to expand this and other preventative health programs (such as anti-smoking) in schools.

- **Prevention II - Child and Maternal Health**

Early maternal and child healthcare is a priority area for Centre. With additional funding, it would aim to organise regular specialist antenatal and paediatric follow up clinics to regional NSW. Maternal and child health is also a priority area for the Commonwealth Government, and an immediate goal for the Centre is to develop programs which may be supported by the Government as it works towards achieving targeted reductions in infant mortality and morbidity.

- **Indigenous Health Careers**

Training more Indigenous healthcare workers through practical programs which provide real clinical skills would greatly relieve the pressure on existing healthcare providers in remote locations. The Faculty of Medicine would like to

reinstate its highly regarded Diploma in Indigenous Primary Health Care, previously run at its campus in Broken Hill but put on hold this year because of low student numbers.

Students were deterred partly due to costs – the course is HECS liable plus students had to meet travelling and accommodation expenses incurred during their study blocks in Broken Hill.

Lack of support from Greater Western Area Health Service has also been a factor, and this has been subject of discussion with GWAHS. The Faculty would like to reinstate a course in Broken Hill, and if funds could be secured, run a similar course from its Sydney Camperdown campus.

- **Increased medical, dental, nursing and allied health students with experience in Indigenous Health**

Expanding the number of outreach clinics would have a direct impact on the number of students able to gain experience in Indigenous health care, and potentially attract greater numbers to practice in Indigenous settings and in rural and remote Australia.

4. Conclusion

The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sydney is committed to improving the health of Indigenous people, and believes that the establishment of the Centre for Indigenous health will allow it to make a real and lasting contribution. The Centre will operate on a consultative and inclusive basis, working with Indigenous people in planning and implementing its programs.

Positions of Director and Deputy Director of the Centre were advertised in early March, and the Faculty is hopeful that an appointment can be made shortly.

Members of the Faculty would be happy to discuss the Centre for Indigenous Health and its operations in more detail with the Committee.