

Open letter concerning the Aboriginal Medical Service Western Sydney

1 July 2015

Senator The Hon. Fiona Nash  
Assistant Minister for Health  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

cc: The Hon. Tony Abbott MP, Prime Minister of Australia  
The Hon. Sussan Ley MP, Minister for Health  
Senator The Hon. Nigel Scullion, Minister for Indigenous Affairs  
Mr Warren Snowdon MP, Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Indigenous Affairs

Dear Assistant Minister

We are a group of concerned academics from the School of Public Health and Community Medicine (SPHCM), UNSW, who wish to express concern about reports in the national media foreshadowing the withdrawal of core funding and imminent closure of the Aboriginal Medical Service Western Sydney (AMSWS).

Aboriginal community controlled health services have a pivotal role in providing safe and empowering health care to their constituents around this country through their social health care model. The AMSWS is no exception. Reportedly the AMSWS has 11,000 active patients on its books and is well known as a provider of comprehensive primary health care services to the largest Aboriginal population in the country.

The Closing the Gap framework, which aims to reduce health inequity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, is premised on increasing accessibility of services. Culturally appropriate Aboriginal community controlled comprehensive primary health care services, based on a continuous quality improvement model such as that conducted by the AMSWS, have been shown to be effective in meeting the complex needs of Aboriginal individuals, families and their communities.

This is premised on a social health care model that provides for social and emotional wellbeing alongside clinical care needs, such as by providing a culturally secure, therapeutic setting that is the focus of community activity. Indeed, federal and state policies pertaining to Aboriginal health place culture at the centre of care. Further, the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* recognises the importance of Indigenous peoples having self determination to strengthen culture, and this occurs through services such as the AMSWS. Culture has been shown worldwide as an integral determinant of health. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health sector and the services it provides are regarded internationally as best practice models of integrated and

comprehensive care. Communities in parts of North America, South East Asia and parts of Western Asia are using models of care developed here in Australia as a way of working with their most vulnerable populations.

Replacing a continuous quality improvement service model such as the AMSWS with, as it is claimed in the media, a model based on competitive procurement runs the very real risk of reversing recent improvements in timely access to health care by the Western Sydney community. Competitive tenders inherently favour large mainstream organisations. Recent research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regularly experience racism in mainstream settings; mainstream services often report that their staff members are ill-equipped and poorly trained in cultural appropriateness; and they also report difficulties in stimulating access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These issues are already recognised by federal and state policies stating the need for cultural safety.

The community controlled health sector is a leading employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout the country, including Western Sydney. The potential loss of jobs combined with the potential loss of professional skills and experience and social, cultural and community capital built up over decades at the AMSWS makes the prospect of its closure, in our view, potentially catastrophic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in Western Sydney.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health and medical services often experience demand for their services that outstrips supply. Growing an Indigenous workforce to meet this demand has been a key focus of UNSW Medicine for over a decade. SPHCM is a leading public health educator in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region and is committed to excellence in research, learning and teaching and action to enhance public health and health services across Australia and internationally. UNSW and the SPHCM enjoy a reputation as the university of choice for many hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from around Australia, and for many thousands of students internationally. We have a long tradition of working in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health sector in our research and in our teaching. In 2013, six Aboriginal staff from the AMSWS graduated from SPHCM with qualifications in public health.

We urge your government to do its utmost to achieve a solution to the situation facing AMSWS without closing this service down; and while doing so promote a message of faith and commitment to a sector that is the envy of the world and vital to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Closing the Gap is within our reach. It will only be achieved through genuine partnership between governments and the communities they serve. Your government has an important role to play.

We look forward to your urgent response.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Abrar A. Chughtai, Ms Kylie Vuong, Ms Christine Rousselis, Dr Rose Leonitini, Professor Robyn Richmind, Dr Rachelle Arkles, Professor Joanne Travaglia, Ms Jennifer Price, Ms Anil Singh-Prakash, Dr A. Kojo Asante, Ms Lisa McCallum, Dr Md. Mahfuz Ashraf, Professor Heather Worth, Associate Professor David Heslop, Dr Joel Rhee, Mrs Christina Rofe, Ms Nicole Mealing, Mr Kevin Forde, Dr Robin Turner, Ms Ravit Danieli-Vlandis, Professor Mary-Louise McLaws, Ms Sarah Jacob, Mr Peter Trebilco OAM, Dr Md. Bayzidur Rahman, Dr David Muscatello, Dr Hassan Hosseinzadeh, Ms Erika Villasana, Dr Alexander Rosewell, Professor Richard Taylor, Dr Holly Seale, Professor Nicholas Zwar, Ms Nina Mili, Dr Chinthaka Balasooriya, Dr Heather Gidding, Ms Lois Meyer, Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver AM, Dr Megan Williams, Ms Sally Fitzpatrick, Dr Ilse Blignault, Dr Anne Bunde-Birouste, Professor Raina MacIntyre, Dr Husna Razee, Dr Patrick Rawstorne, Dr Eilean Watson, Associate Professor Melissa Haswell, Dr Angela Kelly, Associate Professor Jan Ritchie, Associate Professor Andrew Hayen

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