

# Discussions on new directions for Indigenous health



A recently-released discussion paper on Indigenous health, prepared by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, is the subject of community consultations currently being held around Australia. The discussion paper is a product of a comprehensive Indigenous health inquiry which began in late 1997 and has taken the Committee to rural and remote Australia, including to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

According to Inquiry Secretary Jim Kennedy, the discussion paper makes a serious attempt not only to outline key problem areas, but also to propose workable solutions to these. "The Committee wanted this paper to do more than describe the systemic failures underlying poor Indigenous health status. They wanted to help promote discussion about viable ways forward."

## *'discussion about viable ways forward'*

The Committee advertised the availability of the paper when it was released in September, and since then more than 500 copies have been distributed to interested members of the public. In November and December the Committee is travelling to Western Australia, the Northern Territory, New South Wales and Queensland where public meetings will provide a forum for discussion and debate about the ideas contained in the paper.

Issues addressed in the paper and expected to be canvassed at the public meetings include service delivery models and funding, data collection, health workforce training, and environmental health. The Committee is especially keen to assess the relative popularity of a number of possible new directions for service delivery which are proposed in the paper – one of which is quite radical.

Service delivery options suggested in the paper include:

- broadening the scope and increasing the level of funding specificity of existing service delivery arrangements between the Commonwealth, State and Territories;
- developing a national Indigenous health plan with a focused set of performance indicators;

- the Commonwealth passing all responsibility for direct funding of services to the States and Territories and concentrating its efforts on monitoring delivery of services and health outcomes;
- the Commonwealth assuming responsibility for all primary health care services and funding these directly; or
- pooling all funds currently allocated to Indigenous health and creating a new independent agency to determine where funding should be allocated, and to assume responsibility for monitoring expenditure and outcomes.

Jim Kennedy says the Committee's view is that the situation with respect to Indigenous health is serious enough to warrant the exploration of bold new ideas. "Look, the sense the Committee has gotten from talking to a wide range of people around the country is that it's time for some thinking outside the square, as they say. They can see that what is there on the ground isn't working well enough, and they want to make sure that the report they table next year has some recommendations in it which they know are both helpful and practical".

## *'thinking outside the square'*

Readers who would like to obtain a copy of the Indigenous health discussion paper and possibly take part in the current round of community consultations are invited to contact the Committee Secretariat on (02) 6277 4566 or visit its web site at [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fca](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fca).