

Good morning and thank you, Chair, for that introduction.

The tempo may be lifted a little with this paper.

Firstly I wish to Acknowledge the Mala Leaders that is the (Traditional Owning Clans leaders) of this land where we are holding this forum.

Miwatj Health topic today is intended to highlight the cultural and physical relationship between Land and Health for yolngu on the Gove peninsula

This paper is intended to be a bit provocative to stimulate further debate around health service delivery in this area.

- We will start by going down memory lane on the Gove peninsula battle field regarding the opening of the mine.
- Aboriginal people in NE Arnhem Land have been constantly asserting for decades and decades that human health and the health of country are intertwined - they are one and the same thing. Destroy country and you will destroy the health of yolngu people.
- Yolngu said it in giving evidence at the Senate Committee hearings in 1973 when they opposed the mine opening here. At that time all Yolngu leaders stood shoulder to shoulder and spoke strongly, with one voice as one Yolngu nation.
- They said it would turn their beloved sacred sites into a moonscape, and would destroy Melville Bay - which had been an important larder for food and resources for thousands and thousands of years.

And just look at the Gove Peninsula today - everything which Yolngu leaders (including Galarrwuy's father) predicted in the 1970's has come true. It is no wonder Yolngu are sick when their country is so sick.

- In 1979 Yolngu leaders wrote in a letter to the Prime Minister that said:

"We are deeply shocked at the result of the recent court case. We cannot be satisfied with anything less than ownership of the land ... We are worried that without the land future generations would not maintain our culture ... This place does not belong to the white man. They only want it for the money they can make. They will destroy the plants, animal life and culture of the people."

- Visitors to the Garma Festival today- look at Nhulunbuy and the mine site today, you will see the results of what the leaders predicted.
- Yolngu get sick, when their country is sick ?
 - But of course the Commonwealth Government has never listened to Yolngu. And still today, Yolngu have no legal say over the land where the mine is and where Nhulunbuy is. That is land which the Commonwealth Government took from Yolngu and leased to the mining company. And both the Government and mining company have repeatedly refused - for the past 40 years - to give it back. It is a real mess. I am sure Galarrwuy and other malo leaders around Garma today can tell you more about that story if you ask them.
 - Now, for you **balanda/Napaki** visitors to Garma, you need to understand yolngu beliefs about land and spirits. Yolngu will tell you about Galka. These are spirits which live on country in the bush. They can do things to Yolngu. Yolngu will tell you that if Aboriginal people are on their own country, and if kinship relationships are done the proper way, Galka will stay away. But if people are not on their country, then kinship will be wrong - because relationships come from the land. And this is when Galka come out and can make people sick and even cause deaths.
 - Now some **balanda/Napaki** don't understand this idea of Galka. But Yolngu have the evidence on their side, both western scientific and traditional.
 - At the small homeland settlements in this region, Galka usually keep quiet. And at homeland centres there is western scientific evidence to establish that yolngu people are much healthier than

people who live at the larger ex-missions such as Yirrkala, where people and kinship is all mixed up.

- At the small homeland centers in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people live much longer and have much lower rates of all the chronic diseases, like diabetes and cardiovascular disease, than Aboriginal people who live at the big ex-missions like Yirrkala or Galiwinku. Balanda/Napaki say this is because people at homelands eat better and get more exercise. This is true but it is also true to Yolngu because they are on their proper country and kinship is done the right way.
- The point I am making is that land and health are intertwined not only in an Aboriginal sense but also in a western scientific sense. Yolngu leaders and western doctors agree on this: the evidence is that land and population health outcomes are connected.
- But it seems that no-one has told this to Prime Minister John Howard or his mate Mal Brough. The current Australian Government policy is to freeze funding to homeland centers.
- The current policy mean - No more funding for new homelands and no more funding to build new houses on existing outstations, and they will not support people who want to move out of the "big communities" where people suffer higher rates on mortality and morbidity, to go back to live at the homelands, on their own country.
- A recent Government Minister has gone as far as described homeland centres as "cultural museums". This is nothing less than explicit racism.
- Now how clever is Government policy when it says "we want to improve the health of Aboriginal people", yet at the same time is trying to destroy the one thing which evidence shows does bring better health outcomes??
- This one thing is the homelands movement. This is short-sighted, ignorant and racist policy.

- So, what is the role of an Aboriginal health service in this situation? Of course we employ doctors and nurses and health workers, we use western science, and we provide western medicine. But is that enough?
- Well, we don't think so. Like all people, Yolngu have a basic human right to health care. If Yolngu need to talk to a doctor, we are here so they can do that. But Yolngu also have a basic human right to land. Like I said earlier, the right to health and the right to land are intertwined.

So it is part of the business of Miwatj Health to support land rights for Yolngu, because this is the same as supporting health rights for Yolngu.

Good health cannot be achieved for Yolngu without rights to land.

- Now, before finishing I have to make some points about health services for Aboriginal people in this region.
- **I have been in Gove for a long time, coming and going for about 17 years - I have biological family members in this region- but I have only been with Miwatj Health for less than one year. So I have been learning about how the health scene operates. And I am appalled at what I have found out.**
- It is obvious that health service provision by the Northern Territory Government to Yolngu communities in this region is substantially inadequate to say the least. Health services which people in cities take for granted simply do not exist in almost all Yolngu communities in this region.
- If you live in Milingimbi, it is unlikely that you will see a doctor. If you live in Gapuwiyak, forget about seeing a physiotherapist. If you are a diabetic living in Yirrkala, forget about seeing a dietician. I could go on and on, but I think you get the point.
- But if you live in Darwin, you not only get all these services - you also get a Wave Pool as part of the water front development!!

- And what about the Commonwealth Government ? The Commonwealth Government has no strategy to tackle illness among Yolngu people in this region.
- In the past few months, Miwatj Health has been refused Commonwealth funds to employ an ear health team - in a region where the majority of children have ear and hearing problems. Hearing is important to improvement in all social and life skills, from education to social interaction.
- It amazes me that in 2007, after all the publicity over the past 30 years or so about the crisis in Aboriginal health, the Commonwealth still has no strategy for dealing with one of the sickest groups of people in Australia.
- Apart from the Howards political road show. I won't go into that you would all know about that.
- Most of their effort are put into bureaucratic paper-shuffling rather than rolling up their sleeves and getting involved.
- Over the years I have seen many stuff-up made by bureaucratic and successive governments.
- But I must say that the current funding and service delivery arrangements of health services in East Arnhem rates pretty close to the top of the basket cases I have ever experienced.
- I would rate the current "scatter gun approach to health funding and service delivery so appalling that it is comparative to the earlier policies of attempted genocide of aboriginal people.
- It is the bean counters who run health policy for the Commonwealth Government, and one could question the bean counters interested in improving yolngu health.
- Speaking of bean counting, the experts say it would cost an extra \$450 million for the Commonwealth Government to fund all Aboriginal health services in Australia adequately, to give them the funds so they can do the job they were set up for. The Government regularly has budget surpluses of billions of dollars. 15 Billion

dollars last year. Yet do you think they will devote just a small portion of this to funding all Aboriginal health services so they can actually fix some of the health problem ? I can tell you - from the experience of Miwatj Health - that the answer is a resounding no.

- So where does all this leave us ? We have a situation in which the provision of health services by the NT Government to Yolngu people is little short of scandalous. We have a situation in which the Commonwealth Government bureaucracy simply has no idea what it is doing. And we have a situation in which the Commonwealth Government is trying to take away the rights of Yolngu to land, to stop the homelands movement, to remove the one thing which evidence shows produces good health outcomes.
- Well, Yolngu will keep doing what they have done for decade after decade. They will fight. Whether or not they will win depends on those of you present today who will joins in that fight. That is your decision to make.
- Thank you.
- Eddie Mulholland, Chief Executive Officer, Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation. Monday 6 August 2007. GARMA SPEECH.