

Statement from the Delegates at the 9th annual Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses (CATSIN) conference in Alice Springs

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The delegates at the 9th national conference of CATSIN today declared their opposition to the process of the rollout of the Howard Government emergency intervention in the NT and also questioned the legitimacy of the legislation that has made the intervention possible.

The way that the intervention has been conducted, the lack of consultation and communication with Indigenous service providers, and the secrecy around its implementation has created fear, confusion and uncertainty amongst communities, Indigenous services providers and government representatives.

The statement said:

“CATSIN acknowledges the outstanding health delivery through Aboriginal Health Services.

“The delegates at the conference consider that this intervention is not in the best interests of the children, families and communities in the NT and will further marginalise the already impoverished and disenfranchised people living in poorly serviced and isolated communities, and fails to recognise the importance of land to the maintenance of Indigenous health and wellbeing.

“The cultural and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous people is also inseparable from their connection with land.

“It comes as no surprise that this Australian government has refused to support the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights signed by 143 member nations earlier this month since it articulates all the Indigenous rights that are under threat from this intervention.

“The intervention has failed to build on some of the significant success stories in the NT in delivering culturally appropriate comprehensive primary health care by neglecting to involve service providers who, but for a lack of federal government investment, could be better addressing the health and social inequalities in the communities they are serving.

“The federal government does not realise the fragility of these communities and the effect that these imposed interventions have on Indigenous mental health and wellbeing and community self esteem.

“It has failed to acknowledge that empowerment is intrinsic to improvement in Indigenous health and that the process has been completely disempowering for Indigenous people.

“The intervention has focussed specifically on the NT which ironically has the strongest land rights in Australia. The delegates queried the underlying motivation of the intervention as having more to do with the acquisition of natural resources than the protection of children.

“Children are being used as an excuse for an intervention that is disempowering the very communities it purports to assist. It has meant Indigenous people in the NT now feel as though they are under surveillance and their every move is being monitored. Government documents record their Indigenous status – who else in this country is so identifiable?”

“While the legacy of many past federal government policies could once be considered to be ‘smoothing the pillow of the dying race’, this intervention threatens to yank the pillow out entirely.”

The delegates also expressed concern with regard to the mainstream media coverage of the intervention so far which has focussed on perpetuating negative stereotypes of Indigenous people and failed to report the widespread deep concerns and hurt being expressed by Indigenous people.

The legislation that has made this intervention possible has been widely criticised, including by the Law Council of Australia, as in contravention to the *Racial Discrimination Act* but this has also been little reported. This has created concern that the legislation was developed in order to legitimately discriminate against Indigenous people.

“What’s the recourse now for people who are discriminated against within the NT?” the delegates asked.

“As has been already noted by many Aboriginal groups in the NT, the intervention was undertaken without consultation with either Indigenous groups or communities.”

“The intervention totally ignores the international evidence about the importance of land rights and community controlled services in improving health and social inequality and in developing successful Indigenous communities.”

“The quarantining of welfare payments will push people, already without access to fresh food in community stores, already on the brink of poverty, into further financial difficulty.”

The delegates called on the federal government to transfer the funds for this intervention to appropriate comprehensive primary health care services, such as Aboriginal community controlled health services, and other vital community agencies such as education, housing, and policing to address the social determinants of health.

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