



# NEWS RELEASE

## Health bodies united in support for new Medicare initiative

Three leading primary health care organisations – the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) – have all welcomed the new Medicare-funded annual health checks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children announced by Health Minister Tony Abbott last week.

The aim of the additional Medicare item is to encourage GPs to carry out regular, comprehensive health checks on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-14 years, promoting early detection of disease and better intervention.

Dr Naomi Mayers, Acting NACCHO Chair, said that adult health can be improved if Aboriginal and TSI children have access to primary health care. She said: “There is good evidence that Aboriginal children are less likely to be vaccinated than other children, have more anaemia, have poorer access to hearing services even though deafness is more common from ear infections and they are at higher risk of developing poor health as adults. By encouraging early health checks, we know this situation can be changed”.

“Child health checks are essential to monitor child health and development and are best practice,” Dr Mayers said.

The RACGP believes that evidence from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities shows that childhood illnesses translate into ongoing adult health problems “By acting to meet these challenges early in life, better health can provide a greater chance for positive education, social and employment outcomes. This additional funding recognises the valuable role played by general practice in delivering enhanced health care for some of our most disadvantaged Australians,” Professor Kidd, President, Royal Australian College of General Practitioners said.

ADGP Chair Dr Rob Walters said the new items “closed a gap” that had existed in the current stock of health prevention measures accessible to the Aboriginal and TSI population. “This initiative will provide a mechanism for Aboriginal peoples and TSI peoples of all ages to access preventive health care, something that is critically

important given the well-documented, tragically poor health levels of Australia's Indigenous population."

Dr Walters said the new health check item demonstrated that preventative health initiatives – aimed at promoting good health rather than simply treating disease down the track – were "a major priority for the Government, as they should be".

"It is encouraging that the Government appears to recognise that investing in primary care strategies not only saves health dollars but promotes good health outcomes. The pay off comes in the form of healthier communities overall and hospitals less burdened by patients needing treatment for preventable diseases."

The initiative was applauded by ADGP CEO Kate Carnell who said that GP and consumer awareness and education strategies were needed to support uptake of the health check item. "Initiatives like these are welcome. Critical to their successful uptake, and the better health outcomes that they are intended to bring about, is a supported implementation strategy," Ms Carnell said.

Dr Mayers said that NACCHO had advocated for an implementation strategy for some time. "GPs and Aboriginal Health Workers need more than just information. If we can teach our health workers and doctors to use these health checks with hands-on and practical supports, this will definitely make a difference. We know this because it has worked with other programs". She said that the child health and the adult health check initiatives set an international precedent and were an important step forward.

"The RACGP congratulates both NACCHO and the Australian Government for improving access to vital primary health care services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians," Professor Michael Kidd said.

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