

Media Release

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Access to medicines an issue in Aboriginal health

Changes in the supply of medicines in remote Aboriginal communities is making a real difference. But much more needs to be done, according to Dr Richard Murray, Medical Director of the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council in WA.

"The continuing high rates of death and disease suffered by Aboriginal people in Australia compares very poorly to similar populations in countries such as the USA, Canada and New Zealand", Dr Murray says.

Treatable chronic diseases like diabetes and as well as infections such as pneumonia are major killers. Rheumatic fever and chronic ear infection, forgotten in the general population, are rife. Access to medicines is therefore a critical issue (along with access to primary health care and real effort to address health determinants such as poverty, employment, education and housing). Despite this high level of need, Aboriginal people, even those living in urban areas, have poor access to medicines.

"Spending per person by the Commonwealth government on medicines for Aboriginal people is only a third of that for other Australians," says Dr Murray.

Special supply arrangements for medicines in remote areas (brokered through the Australian Pharmaceutical Advisory Council by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Pharmacy Guild of Australia and the Commonwealth government) are a step in the right direction but more needs to be done. This includes addressing the needs of Aboriginal communities in rural and urban areas and expanding professional pharmacist support arrangements.

Legal dispensing of medicines is another important issue, according to Dr Murray. "The fact that prescribing activities are often outside the legal framework is a failure of health policy rather than a reflection on appropriate multidisciplinary practice... the focus should be on how to ensure community access to and quality use of essential medicines," he said.

It is particularly important that legislation supports the critical role of Aboriginal health workers in medicines supply.

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For further information or expert commentary about this article please contact Miriam Fletcher at NPS on (02) 8217 8700 or 0417 422 420 or by email at mfletcher@nps.org.au.

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