



Building on the
Close the Gap platform

COMMITMENTS FOR AN INCOMING GOVERNMENT

CLOSETHEGAP

CLOSE THE GAP
CAMPAIGN STEERING
COMMITTEE

A message from our Campaign Patron Ian Thorpe

I got behind the Close the Gap Campaign¹ back in 2007 because I believe it's totally unacceptable that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people die 10–17 years younger than non-Indigenous Australians.

Thankfully all sides of politics agreed and five years ago the commitment of federal, state and territory governments through COAG to close the life expectancy gap by 2030 was a watershed moment for the nation.



So as we prepare for the forthcoming federal election, I urge all political parties to continue their non-partisan long-term commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality.

This non-partisan project has been embraced by the nation, with almost 200,000 Australians pledging support for the Campaign. The foundations to achieve health equality are now in place. We, as a nation, need to stay the course and ensure long-term commitment and policy continuity is in place to reflect the long-term nature of our collective goal. Together, I believe we can close the gap.

Building on the Close the Gap platform, prepared by the Close the Gap Campaign for an incoming government, sets out the agenda for the government of the 44th Parliament to continue to close the unacceptable life expectancy gap.

I have seen the need and I have seen the impact that the close the gap agenda has had on the ground – it is improving the health of the First Australians. I believe that we can be the generation to end the national disgrace that sees Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people die more than 10 years younger than members of the broader Australian community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Thorpe'.

Ian Thorpe, Close the Gap Campaign Patron

Join Ian by signing the Close the Gap Campaign Pledge at <https://www.oxfam.org.au/my/act/sign-the-close-the-gap-pledge>.

Public support for this national priority

To date over 188,000 Australians have formally pledged their support for the Campaign and its goal to close the health and life expectancy gap of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to that of the non-Indigenous population within a generation: to close the gap by 2030.

Since 2009 the Campaign has held a National Close the Gap Day each year. Australians across the country in every state and territory participate in the event. Health services, schools, businesses, hospitals, government departments, ambulance services, non-government organisations and others hold events to raise awareness and show support for the Campaign and its goals. It is the largest and highest profile Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health event in the country. This year's record breaking National Close the Gap Day, on 21 March, involved more than 140,000 Australians at 972 events across the country.

In addition to National Close the Gap Day, the NRL holds an annual Close the Gap round which reaches between 2 and 3 million people through media coverage of the round and on ground exposure to the Close the Gap message.

Close the Gap is a growing national movement

The message clear: Australians want continued government action on the national priority to close the gap in health and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians.

Executive summary

Building on the Close the Gap platform outlines the key commitments and milestones for the government of the 44th Parliament.

Meeting these commitments is critical if we are to finally close the gap in health and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians by 2030. Undertaking these commitments will continue the multi-party efforts to close the gap. The broad national support for the Close the Gap Campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality demonstrates this is action that the Australian people want.

The Close the Gap Campaign has consistently advocated for long-term approaches and policy continuity. *Building on the Close the Gap platform* sits within this long-term approach and sets out the concrete actions to be undertaken in the forthcoming term of government.

Building on the Close the Gap platform sets out clear commitments and milestones for achievement by government in the first 100 days, the first year and throughout the term of government. The Close the Gap Campaign will monitor progress during the term of government including through its annual shadow or progress report, which is released to coincide with the Prime Minister's *Closing the Gap Report*.

The Close the Gap Campaign calls for an incoming government to:

In the first 100 days (see pages 6-7)

- Reaffirm the commitment of the Prime Minister to report on progress towards closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians. This should occur on, or as near to as possible to, the first day of Parliament at the start of the calendar year.
- Forge an agreement through the COAG process on a new *National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes*, with a minimum Commonwealth investment of \$777 million over the next three years.
- Establish a clear process that ensures a national implementation strategy for the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023* is developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representatives.

In the first year (see pages 8-9)

- Finalise a national implementation strategy for the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023* developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their representatives as well as state and territory governments. This strategy should include measurable benchmarks and targets to monitor progress.
- Develop a whole-of-government mechanism across sectors and portfolios to drive an integrated response to health issues and their social and cultural determinants, including the impacts of intergenerational trauma.
- In partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representatives, as well as state and territory governments, develop specific COAG Closing the Gap targets in relation to incarceration rates and community safety.

During this term of government (see page 10)

- Introduce and pass legislation to formalise a process for national monitoring and reporting on efforts to close the gap in accordance with benchmarks and targets. This legislation should include a requirement for this process to be undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representatives. It should also have a sunset clause of 2031 – the year after the date by which all parties have committed to close the gap in health equality.
- Develop formal mechanisms that ensure long-term funding commitments, including the National Partnership Agreements, are linked with progress in closing the health equality gap.
- Develop a new mechanism to determine the appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander share of mainstream health programs on a basis that reflects both the population size and an index of need.

First 100 days

There is 17 years to go until 2030. Policy continuity and transparent reporting is critical for the achievement of health equality over that span of time.

To maintain momentum it is imperative that early in its term, an incoming government clearly and unambiguously signals its commitment to the Closing the Gap policy platform and reporting process.

The Campaign produces a complementary “Shadow Report”² coinciding with the Prime Minister’s annual report to Parliament on progress towards closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians.³ It has become a welcome tradition that the Prime Minister meets with and exchanges reports with the Steering Committee of the Close the Gap Campaign.

Australians want to see this commitment backed up by action. There are two developments that together will be major determinants on whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality is achieved by 2030:

- The renewal with adequate funding of the expired *National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes* (Indigenous Health NPA);
- The implementation of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023* (Health Plan).

The Indigenous Health NPA and the Health Plan are complementary. Action on both is essential.

If supported by necessary funding and effectively implemented the Health Plan will be crucial in closing the gap in health equality. The next step is the development of a national implementation strategy to set out detailed and comprehensive commitments with measurable targets and benchmarks to monitor progress over time. This needs to be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representatives.

The National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF) of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (Congress) has been established to partner with the federal government in the development, implementation and monitoring of all national level policies with health impacts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This Partnership also needs to be replicated at the state/territory and local levels.

The Close the Gap Campaign calls for the following commitments from an incoming government, in the first 100 days:

- Reaffirm the commitment of the Prime Minister to report on progress towards closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians. This should occur on, or as near to as possible to, the first day of Parliament at the start of the calendar year.
- Forge an agreement through the COAG process on a new *National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes*, with a minimum Commonwealth investment of \$777 million over the next three years.
- Establish a clear process that ensures a national implementation strategy for the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023* is developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representatives.



Laidley State High School students in conjunction with Kambu AMS spell out Close the Gap for National Close the Gap Day 2012. Photograph: Jason Malouin/OxfamAUS.

First year

The first year of government is an important time to bring the Health Plan to life. The Close the Gap Campaign welcomes that the Health Plan:

- Has an overarching goal of closing the life expectancy gap by 2030;
- Adopts a human rights-based approach and addresses racism at both the individual and systemic levels;
- Adopts a holistic definition of health including recognition of the impacts of past policies and the ongoing cycle of trauma on the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the role of healing;
- Recognises the central role of culture and social and emotional wellbeing to the physical and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- Is comprehensive and addresses the wide range of social and cultural determinants of health inequality; and
- Includes a commitment to develop targets and benchmarks to measure progress.

Combined, these elements, if effectively implemented, are supported by all of the relevant national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream health bodies.

The Health Plan commits to the development of a national implementation strategy within 12 months. To be effective this must set measurable benchmarks and targets. It must also include the development of a services model and strategies for workforce and funding.

The Health Plan commits government to action on the social and cultural determinants of health including education and employment. A whole-of-government approach led by the Prime Minister is required to coordinate and drive complementary action across jurisdictions and sectors.

For example, the overrepresentation in imprisonment and crime victimisation rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a key social determinant of health requiring urgent, coordinated action from government, including the setting of nationally agreed targets.

The Close the Gap Campaign calls for the following commitments from an incoming government, in the first year:

- Finalise a national implementation strategy for the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023* developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their representatives as well as state and territory governments. This strategy should include measurable benchmarks and targets to monitor progress.
- Develop a whole-of-government mechanism across sectors and portfolios to drive an integrated response to health issues and their social and cultural determinants, including the impacts of intergenerational trauma.
- In partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representatives, as well as state and territory governments, develop specific COAG Closing the Gap targets in relation to incarceration rates and community safety.



Patient Gerry Flanders has a routine check up with Galambila Aboriginal Health Service staff doctor, Jane Deegan. Photograph: Jason Malouin/Oxfam Australia.

During this term of government

Closing the Gap, as a national priority, must involve a coordinated and planned national response across federal, state and territory governments through the COAG process if it is to be successful. A national issue requires a national response. This national response must be monitored against benchmarks and targets so that we know whether we are on track to close the gap.

To be sustainable over the long-term it is essential that funding be tied to efforts to close the gap. Long-term policy requires long-term funding models. We must now also take the next step and secure an equitable share of mainstream funding to contribute to closing the unacceptable gap in health and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians. This will require the development of a new mechanism to determine the appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander share of mainstream health programs on a basis that reflects both the population size and an index of need. It must also ensure the most effective services to receive those funds for service delivery in terms of access and quality of service. The available evidence suggests that Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services are generally the most effective in providing these services.

The Close the Gap Campaign calls for the following commitments from an incoming government, during this term of government:

- Introduce and pass legislation to formalise a process for national monitoring and reporting on efforts to close the gap in accordance with benchmarks and targets. This legislation should include a requirement for this process to be undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their representatives. It should also have a sunset clause of 2031 – the year after the date by which all parties have committed to close the gap in health equality.
- Develop formal mechanisms that ensure long-term funding commitments, including the National Partnership Agreements, are linked with progress in closing the health equality gap.
- Develop a new mechanism to determine the appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander share of mainstream health programs on a basis that reflects both the population size and an index of need.

Conclusion

The commitment to close the life expectancy gap by 2030 was a watershed moment for the nation. We are seeing improvements in maternal and childhood health, which provide early positive signs that people on the ground are responding to the initiatives.

Achieving health equality by 2030 is an ambitious yet achievable task. It is also an agreed national priority. With nearly 200,000 Australians supporting action to close the gap, it is clear that the Australian public demand that government, in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their representatives, build on the close the gap platform to meet this challenge. They believe that we can and should be the generation to finally close the appalling life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians.

Australians want action to close the gap that sees babies born to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander mother between two and three times more likely to die before the age of five, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffering heart disease at twice the rate of non-Indigenous Australians.

That is why the Close the Gap Campaign has set out the actions and commitments required of a new government. This term of government will be critical to achieving the 2030 goal. An incoming government must ramp up the ambition and take further steps in building on this platform.



Kacey Narkle at SWAMS clinic at St John Of God Hospital, Bunbury, Western Australia.
Photograph: Bonnie Savage/OxfamAUS.

Who we are

The Close the Gap Campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equality is a coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous health and human rights organisations. The Campaign's goal is to raise the health and life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to that of the non-Indigenous population within a generation: to close the gap by 2030. It aims to do this through the implementation of a human rights-based approach set out in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's *Social Justice Report 2005*⁴ and the *Close the Gap Statement of Intent*.

The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee (Campaign Steering Committee) first met in March 2006. Our patrons, Catherine Freeman OAM and Ian Thorpe OAM, launched the campaign in April 2007.

Current membership of the Campaign Steering Committee

Co-chairs

- Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission

Members

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation
- Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
- Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association
- Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses
- Indigenous Allied Health Australia
- Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia
- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers' Association
- National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Physiotherapists
- National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
- National Coordinator — Tackling Indigenous Smoking (Dr Tom Calma AO — Campaign founder and former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner)
- National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee
- The Lowitja Institute
- Torres Strait Island Regional Authority

- Australian College of Nursing
- Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council
- ANTaR
- Australian Human Rights Commission (Secretariat)
- Australian Medical Association
- Australian Medicare Local Alliance
- The Fred Hollows Foundation
- Heart Foundation Australia
- Menzies School of Health Research
- Oxfam Australia
- Palliative Care Australia
- Public Health Association of Australia
- Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- Professor Ian Ring (expert adviser)



Kirrily Phillips, oral hygiene specialist at Morayfield AMS gives preventative oral health advice to Janice Blackman. Copyright Jason Malouin/Oxfam Australia.

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Cover photograph

Trainee doctors Dr Scott Hahn and Dr Malavika with Dr Samara Toby, the first Indigenous medicine graduate from the Griffith University Medical school. Copyright: Jason Malouin/Oxfam Australia.

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Copies of this report and more information are available to download at:

www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/health/index.html and www.oxfam.org.au/closethegap.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document may contain images or names of people who have since passed away.

Endnotes

- 1 The Close the Gap Campaign is driven by a Steering Committee of health and human rights bodies and an independent Secretariat that is member funded. Importantly the Campaign is a community initiative. Australians from across the length and breadth of the country have got behind and support the Campaign's goals to achieve health equality by 2030. See page 12 for more detail.
- 2 See www.humanrights.gov.au/close-gap-indigenous-health-campaign#shadow.
- 3 Including on health, housing, employment and education as indicated by progress against the COAG Closing the Gap Targets. The first report was delivered in February 2009 and the second in March 2010. Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivered her first report in February 2011.
- 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2005*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2005, chapter 2. Available online at: www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport05/index.html.

Clarification of the terms “Close the Gap” and “Closing the Gap”

“Close the Gap” was adopted as the name of the human rights based campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality led by the Campaign Steering Committee in 2006. The term “closing the gap” entered the policy lexicon as a result of Campaign’s activities and has since been used to tag COAG and Australian Government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy-specific initiatives aimed at reducing disadvantage — from the COAG Closing the Gap Targets to the *National Partnership Agreement to Closing the Gap on Indigenous Health Outcomes*.

As a general rule, any initiative with “closing the gap” in the title is an Australian Government or COAG initiative. There is a very important difference in the meaning and intention between ‘close the gap’ and ‘closing the gap’ and it is important to note that closing the gap does not necessarily reflect the human rights-based approach of the Close the Gap Campaign, nor does the use of the term reflect an endorsement of them by the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee.



Melanie Lupina, Janette Lupina, June Young, Margaret Anthony, Alex Pearson and Richard Lupina out for some exercise on a beautiful day. Photograph: Jason Malouin/Oxfam Australia.

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