



# **MEDIA RELEASE**

**1 September 2011**

## **Closing the Gap through caring for our people: Year of the Aboriginal Health Worker launched**

**Looking to a future in which we can move forward to create a better environment for our people—from our kids to our old people—is at the heart of the Year of the Aboriginal Health Worker John Paterson, CEO of the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory [AMSANT], said today.**

“It is a future that is at the core of the message we take to the Territory—and the nation,” said Mr Paterson, speaking at the launch of the Year in Katherine today.

“But this message is motivated by hope for the future—not one of negativity and complaint.

“This is the beginning of a year of celebration—not recrimination.

“Yes, we could bitch and complain about mistakes in the past, and lost opportunities.

“But that’s not what AMSANT is about.

“We will learn from each other’s successes, and look to the best way of doing things.

“Closing the Gap through caring for our people is an objective we are totally committed to—and one which we must all undertake.

“The future of the Aboriginal Health Worker as a profession is bleak, unless we act now.

“The number of Aboriginal Health Workers has dropped by 30 per cent in the last decade.

“76 per cent of the profession is over the age of 40, and heading for retirement over the next couple of decades.

“These statistics would be regarded as a scandal if it were to occur in mainstream health practices.

“It is just as much a scandal in Aboriginal primary health care.

“Given that *all* Australians know that the health outcomes of our people are so appalling, the fact that we are seeing the slow starvation of your profession makes it an even greater shame job.

“For over three decades, Aboriginal Health Workers have been at the heart of the Aboriginal Primary Health Care system as registered health practitioners.

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“Uniquely in Australia, Territory Aboriginal Health Workers are professional clinicians as well as providing other health system roles.

“Crucially, our Aboriginal Health Workers are the primary source of advice to non-Aboriginal health professionals, at the front line of cultural safety and with intimate knowledge of how communities work and therefore how to best deliver health services across our health system, from remote communities to hospitals.

“Our Board—and our General Members’ meeting yesterday—have called on governments to listen to our call for backing and resourcing the AMSANT Aboriginal Health Worker Training Reform Plan.

“We have called for increased resources for the training of Aboriginal Health Workers, from VET in schools to marketing the profession; from effective literacy and numeracy programs, to proper apprenticeships.

“The motto of the Year of the Aboriginal Health Worker is simple:

### *Closing the Gap through caring for our people*

“That’s all we ask from of the year ahead:

- a recognition of the profession of Aboriginal Health Workers, and the fundamentally important role they play in improving the health of our people.
- equity in the treatment of Aboriginal Health Workers in housing and benefits that accrue to other health professions, such as nurses and GPs;
- the commitment and resources to grow the profession to build on the successes we have in Aboriginal Comprehensive Primary Health Care; and
- a recognition of the vital role our Aboriginal Health Workers have in Closing the Gap in Aboriginal health outcomes.

“We’re looking to a future in which we can move forward to create a better environment for our people—from our kids to our old people.

“Aboriginal Health Workers provide us with our most important pathway in achieving this historic task.”

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