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**Insights into support for achieving personal health goals**

Delegates at the 12th National Rural Health Conference have been challenged by Tom Calma and Louise Sylvan to think about new ways of promoting good health in rural Australia.

Tom Calma, National Coordinator for Tackling Indigenous Smoking, spoke about the importance of partnerships and knowledge in work to reduce smoking. People need to be empowered to have control in their lives and sometimes this means having the choice to reduce their smoking as a more achievable first step than quitting outright. He pointed out that smoking is the major contributor to chronic disease in Aboriginal people – not alcohol, despite what people may think.

The Aboriginal population has a much younger demographic than the mainstream population, which is one of the reasons why media messages that have been successful for the latter have not been so effective for Aboriginal communities. To be effective for Aboriginal people, health messages need to be true stories from real people, delivered in conversational style or through a dramatic and culturally appropriate medium.

Tom called on parliamentarians to listen to people directly involved with a health issue, and allow time for health improvement programs to develop and take effect: governments need to know what local programs are working. He concluded his presentation with the reminder that self-respect breeds dignity, dignity breeds hope and from hope comes resilience.

Delegates were encouraged by the assertion from Louise Sylvan, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian National Preventive Agency (ANPHA), that “the time is right to tackle rural and remote issues – there is capacity now to do work in this area”. Louise said that Australia is a leader in work on smoking – in investment, in social marketing and in successfully reducing smoking rates.

However these approaches have not worked so well in rural and remote communities or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Also, Australia is not doing so well with regard to obesity and lack of exercise and outcomes are worse outside the cities. The good news for rural Australia, however, is that rural children are more physically active than children in the cities.

Louise spoke about the importance of using new ways to tackle challenges and the value of focusing on young people who may have real potential to make a difference in rural and remote communities. In its campaign to tackle binge drinking, the ANPHA has developed partnerships with many of the sports associations with which young people are involved. She said that much of the work in preventive health relates to behavioural change – and behavioural change is personal, it is difficult for governments to do well.

An innovative way to encourage behavioural change with regard to smoking is the My Quit Buddy App. It has a personalised ‘crisis button’ that allows the user to input their own personal motivators. An on-line ‘artificial intelligence’ assistant has also proved to be very effective in the areas of mental health and obesity through providing a non-judgemental virtual friend that seems to reach a wide audience.