Report from the pre-conference workshop on Indigenous health: 
Equal health within a generation—what rural action?

Romlie Mokak, Australian Indigenous Doctors Association

Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me enormous pleasure now to welcome to the stage Romlie Mokak from the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association. Romlie is going to give us a report on the pre-conference workshop on Indigenous health, and the thrust of what they were endeavouring to address was the same cry that was in an open letter to The Australian, equal health for Indigenous people within a generation. Please welcome, Romlie Mokak.

ROMLIE MOKAK: Thank you, Julie. I’m here today in a couple of capacities. One as an Aboriginal person, first and foremost. I’m Djugun—originally from the Kimberley area of Western Australia, my family. I grew up in rural Northern Territory and now find myself in Canberra working in Barton which is just down the hill, so on a daily basis I look up and see the place where a whole lot more Aboriginal people should really be.

The other role that I have is that I’m a council member on the Rural Health Alliance, along with a couple of other Indigenous colleagues, from NACCHO and also Jackie Ah Kit as a member, so I acknowledge both of these organisations and people.

Yesterday we had what was a very stimulating and ambitious attempt at drafting and crafting a statement around Indigenous health and an action plan for the future. Now, what I’ll put up is where we got to, and the call is that this conference, the 1100 delegates at this conference, endorse what came out of yesterday’s pre-conference workshop, a workshop that involved Indigenous and non-Indigenous people trying to find a way forward and to take the actions necessary and go beyond the words and the rhetoric that we’ve heard in many quarters and in lots of policy.

We’ve heard yesterday and today from the Governor, from Tony Abbott, John Menadue this morning, about the importance of Aboriginal health, and the Rural Health Alliance doesn’t shy away from recognising that Aboriginal health and Torres Strait Islander people’s health is the highest priority in relation to our work.

Now, in thinking about the approach, what we did yesterday was use a letter that a number of agencies, including and most importantly the lead agencies for Indigenous organisations, including my organisation, the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, along with Tom Calma, who’s our Social Justice Commissioner. Now, supporting us were some 30-odd national agencies from the Rural Health Alliance, the Royal Flying Doctors Service, OXFAM, a whole bunch of others. This issue isn’t just an issue that we have to consider at this conference, this is an issue that many others are not only thinking about but are actually moving forward on action.

It’s no surprise that there are a number of significant events this year. We’ve already heard about the 40th anniversary of the ‘67 referendum. It’s also an election year, so we need to think about how we continue to put these issues on the agenda on both sides of politics. So, a pretty ambitious thing, but something that’s long overdue.

Now, I’m relatively new to the Rural Health Alliance. I went to my first Council Fest, which was fantastic, late last year. So when I hear that this morning that people have been talking about this stuff for 17 years, you know, that’s the life expectancy gap at best for Aboriginal people, so there’s a resonance there for me as well. A whole lot of talking for 17 years, and that’s really the gap that we’re facing presently.

So, yesterday we, the collective, a group of about a hundred people: about 10 per cent of this delegation, came up with this contextual statement which will form the basis of an action plan. We’re hoping and the challenge is out really for the full delegation to support it with some specific actions that sit behind it. And I’ll just read it out because—while the timeframes were tight—I think it says it
all. So, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality within a generation—that’s the target for our rural action plan.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the oldest living culture in the world. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived in and nurtured this land for thousands of generations. This connection with the land is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. Recently, others have come to also call this land home. We all share a strong connection to this country and a sense of belonging.

And we heard the first speaker this morning talk about, belonging, connection, hope, control, and the importance of that in terms of health.

The impact of colonisation has had a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In addressing the health inequalities experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we acknowledge our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s holistic view of health as not just the physical wellbeing of an individual, it is the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community where each individual is able to achieve their full life potential. It is a whole-of-life view and includes a cyclical concept of life-death-life.

Now, that’s our [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] way of looking at it, but I suspect it’s the way that rural people look at health and wellbeing as well. The issue about full life potential. I think it’s an injustice to all rural citizens that that can be impeded, your full life potential, simply because of the place that you live.

Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people die 17 years earlier than others. This is unacceptable.

So this action plan is based on the following priorities identified in a call for health equality which was published as an open letter to governments as well as the Australian public, and importantly the Australian public—this is not just a thing for governments—it was agreed by leading agencies including the Rural Health Alliance.

And I won’t go through each of the listed priorities, but we see these as minimum.

So, measures about access to primary health care. The health workforce, and we have here, “Developing an Indigenous health workforce”. I would assert that we need to develop a workforce that is appropriate for all people, and we do a lot of work with med schools and medical colleges about getting Indigenous health into their curriculum so that the practitioners that come out the other end are better practitioners for everyone.

“A commitment to the support and nurturing of community controlled health services,” that’s a sector of 139 Aboriginal community controlled health services in this country. “Accessibility to mainstream services,” we hear a lot about the rhetoric of, mainstream services needing to be available and accessible. We need to do a bit of work on that. But we’ve heard some great initiatives, and Jenny May who’s a colleague on council, talked about some of the GP entities that exist up in her part of the world.

An urgent focus on some specific initiatives around child health, maternal health, chronic disease, and also—and this is connected to a whole stack of things that are sometimes under the banner of social or structural determinants of health. So the delegates at this rural health conference 2007, this is all of us, not just the Kooris and the Murris and the Noongas in the room, but all of the delegates at this conference take responsibility to provide leadership to undertake specific actions to work towards eliminating the life expectancy gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within one generation.

Now, that’s the goal. This is about individuals, importantly, and as well organisations and the collective, really asking the questions of ourselves about what we’re going to do about the gap. I won’t go into each of the actions. There’s a process around prioritising actions that will form the basis of the rural action plan. We don’t have time to do that.
What we will have is a two page document, and I think Andrew Waters and Jane Magnus from my office will be supplying that by the end of the day to the registration desk. It’s there for people to look at and consider, but ultimately we want this conference in Albury to support the statement and for us to carry it forward, both with governments, state and territory, and Commonwealth government. Most importantly I think it’s about where we sit or where we stand on these issues into the future. Thank you.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Thank you very much, and obviously the intent of Romlie’s presentation and hearing from the Aboriginal women earlier and that marvellous presentation is to get you thinking about specific recommendations and what you’ll choose to support for the final day of the conference.