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## Indigenous health workforce aims to close the gap

The first group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Project Officers, funded under the Council of Australian Government's Close the Gap program, will begin working with General Practitioners (GPs) in the coming weeks to address Indigenous disadvantage in the health system.

Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) Chair Dr Emil Djakic said 80 full time equivalent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Project Officers (POs) will work with GPs to provide cultural training, service coordination and help Indigenous people access mainstream general practice care.

Speaking at the inaugural Indigenous Health Project Officer Orientation Workshop in Melbourne this morning, at which Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Services Delivery, Warren Snowdon was a keynote speaker, Dr Djakic said the 90 workers joining the health workforce would improve health outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do use mainstream general practice services, but we know they are not always identified properly, they don't always access all the services they have a right to and we see the results in health outcomes," Dr Djakic said.

Dr Djakic said primary health care – either through Aboriginal Health Services or general practice – was the best model of care for Indigenous people.

"Our Indigenous population is most at risk from chronic illnesses, particularly preventable ones like diabetes. The best model to care for these patients is in primary care. We want people to live long and healthy lives, not end up in hospitals and that's what general practice can provide," he said.

Dr Djakic said the government investment in Indigenous health was one of the most important it would make.

"Indigenous health and Australia's failure to improve the health of Indigenous people is one of the key areas of health the government has pledged to address. This is not just an issue for our Indigenous population, it's an issue for all Australians," he said.

Dr Djakic said some issues like access to services and negotiating the health system, which is often intimidating, are concerns for all Australians. The role of the POs is to help Indigenous people manage the system to get the care they are entitled to, but also to support General Practitioners in meeting specific needs of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait islander population.

"GPs need to be aware of barriers and issues for Indigenous people so they feel safe when they see mainstream general practice. It might be just small things that make a difference, but all our patients should feel secure and comfortable when accessing health services," he said.

The Australian Government has committed \$1.6 billion to its Closing the Gap program, of which the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Project Officers is one part. The creation of Indigenous Outreach Workers through the general practice networks is the next step in this program.

**For media interviews contact Communications Manager Frith Rayner on: 0402 267 190**