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Improving health will improve Indigenous lives

A few generations ago, my family lived close to and into their hundreds. Now, most of my family are dying before they are 60.

For someone of my young age, I should not have had to attend the number of funerals that I have, but that's the sad reality of our people.

It is well known that Indigenous people across Australia are dying at alarming rates, and sadly often far too young, but you don't live through the grief and sorrow this is causing in our communities.

The mortality gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians has a great effect upon our elders and their leadership.

The majority of these deaths stem from chronic conditions – heart disease, kidney disease, diabetes and others.

We have seen that the target to close the life expectancy gap by 2031 is not on track.



It is clear that the physical health of our people requires transformation, but most importantly, their health behaviour requires transformation. With early intervention and treatment, the gap in life expectancy can be reduced.

The question of 'how' is now asked. Well, the answer lies in education and comfortability in accessing services, disease treatment, management and follow-up.

I see the need for young Indigenous people to have the opportunity to access a quality education; using this education to benefit themselves, their family and their community.

What this means is that competent

Indigenous doctors, health workers, lawyers, plumbers, carpenters and so on exist with real lived experience, real cultural involvement and real societal engagement; this allows them to connect with the community on a personal level and a spiritual level.

Having just completed Year 12 on an AIEF Scholarship, I want to study medicine so that I can create a strong new direction for our people. Community members are going to present their conditions to a doctor earlier if the health system is comfortable as well as culturally and spiritually appropriate. Because of this connection, the roots of the problem can be addressed, not superficially maintained.

There is an intersection of education and health, and I personally believe that those two concepts need to coexist. For you to maintain health, you need to maintain education. We need to address all aspects of our wellbeing – our

physical, mental, spiritual and lifestyle choices.

The tsunami of our people confined to dialysis machines should be a national outrage. We see every day how the age of our people on dialysis is getting younger and younger. The answer is not more dialysis machines.

Our communities need access to clean drinking water. Our communities need access to affordable healthy food options. Our communities need access to education and the tools to create change.

Our communities are in a constant state of mourning. The elders who lead our communities are not living long enough; their deaths continue an inter-generational effect.

If we reduce the gap and our elders are able to live longer, the leaders will guide those whose potential is unclear or goes unnoticed, helping them to realise their promise.

We need to stop reacting, but rather work towards prevention. And that prevention lies in education and engagement.

Injarra Harbour is a proud descendant of the Waluwarra, Yirendali and Ngwuan people of Queensland. He recently completed Year 12 at St Joseph's Nudgee College on a scholarship from the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation. Injarra and his family appear in the special documentary *Changing Our Nation*, premiering Thursday at 7pm AEDT on Sky News on Foxtel and regional free-to-air channel Sky News on WIN, in partnership with the Commonwealth Bank of Australia.

