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**Speech to the Australian Society of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery
2018 Indigenous Ear Health Workshop**

Thursday 8 March

Perth

I would like to start by acknowledging the Whadjuk Nyoongar people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and future; as well as the elders joining us today.

I would like to thank the Australian Society of Otolaryngology, Head & Neck Surgery for inviting me to speak at your event. I spent a lot of time at ENT Surgeons in my childhood.

It is a great privilege to be here. Welcome to my home town of Perth.

Since 2002, the AMA has produced an Annual Report Card on Indigenous Health.

The Report Card aims to increase the understanding and awareness of the continued health inequalities that exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.

The Report Card aims to expose the disparity in the social determinants that contribute to poorer health outcomes.

Our Report Cards, which long pre-date the Closing the Gap campaigns, have consistently called on governments to continue to recognise, and act upon, the unacceptably disproportionate rates of disadvantage experienced by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

We are deeply disappointed that we still need to produce these Report Cards.

The AMA's 2017 Report focused on the impacts of chronic otitis media and the life-long crippling effects it has on Indigenous Australians.

I applaud Associate Professor Chris Perry and Associate Professor Kelvin Kong for their tireless commitment to addressing otitis media among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and thank you for ensuring that this vital work was brought to the attention of the AMA.

Your often restrained and always professional persistence has lifted the profile of this preventable condition.

We will continue the advocacy that will hopefully pressure the Government to commit to overcoming preventable hearing impairment and deafness, and the life-long crippling effects it has on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

We are privileged to have the Hon Ken Wyatt MP as an advocate, and were honoured to have him launch the AMA's 2017 Report Card on Indigenous Health.

I acknowledge the great pride, and great expectations, that must come with being the first Aboriginal Minister to serve in a Federal Government, and welcome an ongoing relationship forged on a mutual aspiration to end Indigenous disadvantage.

I also thank Senator Rachel Siewert. Your unwavering commitment to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues remain on the Government's agenda is commendable.

And finally, but by no means least, I thank my colleagues, the doctors, the nurses, the audiologists, and other allied health professionals working with tremendous dedication and commitment every day, often in trying and difficult circumstances.

But the evidence is clear - the health system alone cannot carry the sole burden of an effective response.

The AMA has repeatedly said that it is not credible that Australia, one of the world's wealthiest countries, cannot address the health and social justice issues that affect a three per cent minority of its citizens.

The AMA will continue to say this.

This year marks a decade of Closing the Gap. Unfortunately, continued efforts have failed to produce sustainable, tangible, and lasting health improvements.

We are still seeing diseases and health problems that are entirely preventable.

Chronic otitis media is not a hidden or unknown health problem. We have known about the unacceptably high rates in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for at least 60 years.

Yet, despite more than two decades in medical advancement, and a range of government responses, we continue to see endemic levels in many communities.

We know that it is the social determinants of health such as poverty; unhygienic and overcrowded living conditions; and an absence of adequate health services that allow chronic conditions to persist at disproportionately high rates in Indigenous communities.

Australia is reported to have the highest rates of otitis media in the world.

Our 2016 Report Card focussed on Rheumatic Heart Disease. The AMA is in high level conversations with the Government and the Health Department about funding Group A Strep vaccination research.

But again, it is social determinants at play in the causation of this disease process.

The Parliament can change this situation. The Parliament can change the trajectory of disadvantage to close the gap. Genuine, bipartisan action is required to address this 'massive health problem'.

I urge the Government and Opposition to work together to make meaningful investment in Indigenous health. I urge them to take immediate action to close the gap on the rates of chronic otitis media between Indigenous and non-Indigenous infants and children.

I urge the Government to fund a national response to the lasting, disabling effects and social impacts of chronic otitis media on the adult Indigenous population.

I urge the Government to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and sincerely engage communities in solution building, to end this crippling cycle of disadvantage.

Without genuine, and adequately funded, Government commitment to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the gap will remain wide and intractable.

The AMA will continue to work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to develop solutions to respond appropriately to their health needs. The fact they are our first peoples only adds to the moral imperative to act.

We can do better. We must do better.

8 March 2018

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