Patterns of mortality in Indigenous adults in the Northern Territory, 1998–2003: are people living in remote areas worse off?

David J Scrimgeour

To the Editor: I read with interest the article by Andrearyan and Hoy, in which lower Aboriginal mortality rates were found in “very remote areas” compared with “remote areas” in the Northern Territory. In a previous article, I reported a similar finding from national data, based on information published by the Public Health Information Development Unit at the University of Adelaide. Thirty years ago, in this Journal, Morice outlined the health benefits that accrue for Aboriginal people moving away from larger settlements to live in smaller, decentralised communities where they can care for their country. There is an increasing literature to demonstrate that Aboriginal people living in smaller communities have better health than those living in larger settlements and regional towns.

These findings have policy relevance, but they appear to be ignored by policymakers. The current Australian Government is continuing previous policies that do not support decentralised communities, but rather encourage their residents to move to larger communities or regional centres, where mortality is higher. These policies appear to be heavily influenced by allegations based on narrow economic arguments that the lack of “jobs” in small remote communities is a reason for them to be closed down. A minister in the previous federal government derided smaller remote communities as “cultural museums”.

It is disturbing to note that a recent major Australian Government policy announcement stated that funding for the next 6 years will support improvements to the delivery of services across 26 remote locations across the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. These locations represent some of the largest concentrations of Indigenous Australians in remote Australia.

Apparently, over 1100 smaller communities will not receive new funding. This is likely to accelerate the drift from small communities to larger settlements and towns, increasing exposure to health risks. Evidence from the Journal and elsewhere suggests that this drift will increase Aboriginal mortality.

The current Australian Government has made a commitment to “close the gap” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal life expectancies. The Prime Minister has also stated that his government’s policies will be based on evidence. Yet current policies ignore the evidence for the health benefits that accrue to Aboriginal people living in small decentralised communities. These policies also ignore the known health risks associated with larger settlements. Consequently, such policies may widen rather than close the gap.

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