



National Prescribing Service Limited

MEDIA RELEASE

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Need to understand patients' pasts to fully treat health problems

As National Sorry Week comes to a close, a leading indigenous health worker has stressed to health professionals the importance of understanding where patients have come from when diagnosing and treating them.

Speaking at the National Medicines Symposium in Melbourne, Tim Agius, director of Aboriginal health at Sydney's area west health service, has described the horrendous conditions indigenous Australians endured when removed from their homes and the subsequent health conditions that resulted.

These health conditions range from permanent physical scars and injuries through to psychological problems, but Mr Agius says health professionals often don't consider what a patient has been through when they make a diagnosis.

"I heard this week the story of a man who spent most of his youth in a boys' home after being forcibly removed from his family home. This man is now in his 70s but as a child in this home he was sexually abused and beaten. He was identified as a number not as a person, and his feet were permanently damaged because he was not given shoes to wear while working on a farm during harsh winters."

"This man has permanent psychologically damage caused by these horrendous experiences, however unless doctors understand his past and the causes of his health problems today, they cannot expect to improve his health fully."

"Similarly, it does no good sending people who have had terrible experiences back to the places where these things happened. For this man, the thought of going to a hospital is terrifying because it reminds him of the institution where he was a prisoner," Mr Agius said.

Issues with indigenous Australians' access to healthcare have been a key theme at the National Medicines Symposium, which focuses on the primacy of the patient in the provision of health care.

NPS CEO, Dr Lynn Weekes says medicines use programs targeted at indigenous Australians need to be developed in partnership with indigenous Australians.

"We need to listen to what the patient says and treat the whole person, not just focus on the symptoms they present with. This includes working in a community and cultural context relevant to the individual, ensuring that approaches are working," Dr Weekes said.

In his closing remarks, Mr Agius highlighted the gap between health indicators for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and called for new ideas to address the issue.

"Despite all the money that has gone into Aboriginal health since 1990 which totals well over \$4 billion, our life expectancy has not improved. We need approaches that empower people to take control of their own lives so that can take responsibility for themselves," Mr Agius said.

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