

A cry for help

Ted Egan AO, Administrator of the Northern Territory

ARRERNTTE tribute

I wish to state at the outset that I have a long-standing admiration for those people and agencies who have toiled in the field of Australian Rural Health during my own period of connection with Northern Territory outback affairs, now extending well over fifty years.

The level of dedication of doctors, nurses, pilots, carers, paramedics, indeed anybody connected with rural health services, has been admirable, in the great traditions established by the mighty John Flynn. The standard of service in remote regions is still excellent.

I must stress that my experience and observations today are restricted to the Northern Territory. I may be a bit behind the times, and sometimes slightly off the mark in day to day happenings, but I consider myself to be an acute observer of how things are going in “general terms”. Even today.

Rural health involves health matters relating to people who live away from major towns, so we are not talking about larger Northern Territory’s towns, Darwin, Katherine, and Alice Springs, or towns of comparable size in other regions. For the purposes of this talk let’s call residents of larger towns the *townies*. Even though many people from remote regions – let’s call them the *bushies* – get to use the *townies’* facilities if they are admitted to larger hospitals, or are required to re-locate to town for things like dialysis or various forms of surgery, let’s keep them separate in our considerations, for this is a conference concerned with rural health. In reference to other parts of Australia perhaps more familiar to some of you, I’m sure everybody here knows what our parameters are when we talk of “rural health”.

So I’m concentrating today on “the *bushies*” – the people from different backgrounds who live on cattle stations, farms of whatever size, tourist destinations, smaller townships, roadhouses, Aboriginal communities, mining centres. How are they faring, in terms of health standards and health facilities? Given the fact that we are talking about remote, and I mean **remote** places of living for all of these people, and encountering at all times the tyranny of distance, I think many *bushies* are being provided with as good a service as one could devise or would expect. In the Northern Territory let us pay tribute to people like George Tippett, Ellen Kettle, Spike Langsford, Phillip Roberts, John Hargrave, Eileen Jones and Llorabel Reynolds, who laid the foundations in the 1950s for a comprehensive medical facility for outback people in this part of the world. Given a healthy lifestyle, a system of radio consultation and aerial evacuation for emergencies, and ongoing excellent staff, many *bushies* have few complaints in my experience.

But there is one group among the *bushies* whose health standards are deplorable, despicable, disgraceful; I agonise over this fact on an ongoing basis, for among them are many friends of mine. Their health standards, levels of morale, and general demeanour are going down the gurgler so fast you can almost measure it on a daily basis.

I refer, in old-fashioned straight-from-the-hip terminology, to tribalised Aboriginals, numbering probably 50 000 in the Northern Territory. Not people of mixed-race. I am talking about people whose first language is Australian, sometimes referred to as “full-bloods”, people who still retain some level of adherence to ancient culture through ceremonies based on a remarkable association with Nature and the environment that has taken countless thousands of years to evolve. People purportedly served by a rural health system.

All of them were once tough, resourceful people I venture to say that 100 years ago the traditional people of Central Australia, the Arrernte, Warlpiri, Luritja, Pitjantjara, Pintubi, Alyewarra, Anmatjera, Warramungu and Kaytitj, were the toughest people in the world.

They walked naked in this region where we are sitting today in our air-conditioned smugness, never seeing the need for clothing or covering of any kind in temperatures ranging from Fifty above in summer to Minus 10 Celsius in winter. Today, only 100 years later – less in many cases – that same group provides medical statistics that make Australia a nation to be ridiculed. They have an anticipated lifespan in the 40s or perhaps 50s. They have chronic levels of diabetes, heart problems, kidney disease, obesity, alcohol and substance abuse. There is an appalling rate of infant mortality, often caused by things like gastro-enteritis, and especially in the crucial 6–18 month categories where mother’s milk is supposedly replaced by nutritious solids.

At the same time, and related to the above, they lead a meaningless lifestyle, an existence plagued by illiteracy, poverty, smoking, gambling and drinking to excess, an apathy towards education at whatever level, an employment situation that indicates to hard-headed me that only about 1000 out of the 50 000 total are in real, meaningful employment that makes an overall contribution to the economy of the Northern Territory workforce. Many people, especially young men, are nominally employed on CDEPs, but examine these CDEPs, and ask how many of them would be tolerated if the project had to be financed out of private funds rather than taxpayer’s money apportioned by Government. Virtually none.

People live on what are euphemistically called “Communities”, suggesting some level of harmonious, positive and progressive existence. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead of harmony there is abject and total sterility. No facilities of any kind to stimulate cultural activity. A level of vandalism that indicates a total lack of control, pride or proprietorship; that is understandable if not condonable when one considers that the residents did not choose the sites for these communities in the first place. Quite often clans and language groups who traditionally would have avoided one another like the plague, are thrown together, expected to co-exist, and blamed when there are riots. They never have any real say or input into their destiny. Children go to school if they feel like it, and only if there are a few inducements, but there’s no demonstrable hunger for education. Aboriginals are not expected to be good at anything. No wonder they are unhealthy.

I acknowledge that there is a commendable, meaningful and valuable art movement in Central and northern Australia that has great value in keeping ceremonial matters in the forefront, as well as providing incomes for the artists and their families. Art, and football are the most positive things happening. Those pursuits are to be commended, and fostered, and I applaud all the people involved. I’ll stay in positive mode for a few seconds. There are many special people with important ceremonial roles to fulfil, and these probably number hundreds in total. Thank goodness that, for many groups in tribal Australia, language and ceremonies are still alive and relatively important. At least there is some chance of revitalisation.

But otherwise there are hardly any Aboriginal people doing anything other than menial tasks, and attending meetings. Ah, yes the meetings. There are countless meetings where groups of white advisors table schemes, coin new acronyms, use mystifying jargon, and turn Aboriginal life into farce. The Aboriginals say “yes” even if they think “no” because they know that whitefellers like acquiescence. Whitefellers have access to motor cars, trips to town, interstate and overseas. AND they have those magic credit cards that pay for long lunches.

For Aboriginal Affairs is big business. Huge business, in fact. Of a level that keeps the front pages of newspapers fed with dreadful news about riots, deaths in custody, fraud, and political intrigue. All of this is peppered with statistics that tell the rest of the world that in cocky

Australia, a nation that likes to tell every other country in the world how to run their affairs, there is this festering sore that enables the Dr Mahatiars of the world to lampoon us at every opportunity – in the world's eyes we are engaged in the ongoing genocide of our Aboriginal people, the First Australians.

All of the above causes us as a nation to wring our hands with guilt, and throw billions of dollars into the endless quest to improve the lifestyle of Aboriginals. All seemingly to no avail. And the paradox is, that the more money is spent, the worse things get. Particularly in health matters. I know, because I constantly watch my friends dying. My generation of Aboriginal friends are mostly dead. I played in the 1954 Grand Final in Darwin for St Mary's. Fourteen of our 20 players were Tiwi. Everyone of them is dead. Ngia pukumani mor mantauwi.

On the face of it, Aboriginals have never had it so good" All the old discriminatory laws are repealed; in many areas there is affirmative action to allow opportunities for Aboriginal enhancement. Aboriginals in most cases are the owners of their land" But the big problem is that the system does not require them to be any good any more. Once they had to be good or they wouldn't survive. Now nobody expects anything of them, and they are not surviving.

The health service set up in rural areas for the bushies works admirably. For the white bushies, but not the black. White kids are healthy, white people in small rural communities thrive because they have a wonderful health system available to them. Aboriginal people, with the same health system available to them, have third world statistics in the areas I mentioned above. Are they dumb, or what? Are their critics right? That they are so bloody lazy they don't deserve any better? Are they really the same people who were once the toughest on earth?

Are we game to face up to things, and help **cause** them to be healthy even if they don't seem to want to be? Whether they like it or not. I am not a pessimist by nature, but I think the situation is so bad that it is crisis time, time for some radical moves"

Such as? Well, for a start I'd get out the cheque book and offer something like \$100 per dog in the bush communities, on the understanding that people sign for the money, and agree not to have any dogs any more. A dog-free society. Do I hear the critics howl? How dare Ted Egan deny Aboriginals their traditional affinity with dogs, which are vital to them for hunting? On the best-run Aboriginal place I ever saw, Umbakumba in the 1950s, Aboriginals agreed to a local rule: No dogs. It worked: they were healthy.

And show me one Aboriginal who hunts in the traditional way with dogs these days. Dogs on Aboriginal communities are bad news. You see a mangy dog drink out of the same billycan that is then offered to a baby. You don't need to have a medical degree to work out how gastroenteritis starts. \$100 a pop. Best money ever spent.

So we've got rid of the dogs. What next?

Let's stop imposing standard western-style housing on tribal Aboriginal people, whose health suffers accordingly. Build sensible shelters to shield the elements. Provide windbreaks, waterproofing, construct shades of attractive designs, allowing people to do what they have done for thousands of generations – basically live outside, where the sun is a great steriliser.

At the moment we keep foisting standard three-bedroom housing on people with nil training on how to use such houses. People who have made no financial contribution to the cost of the house, whereby a sense of proprietorship might be established. People who have had no involvement in the design or construction. People who are required by their beliefs to move out of the house when somebody dies. And these are houses that cost about \$500 000 each, erected by white contractors who do things like bring ReadMix concrete hundreds of miles by road. Go to places like Yuendumu, in this Central Australian region, where there are dozens of

abandoned similar houses, thereafter the target for mindless vandalism. Countless millions of dollars have been spent on housing in the lifetime of Yuendumu, about fifty years. But go there tomorrow, and you will still find people living alongside abandoned houses in wurlies made from sheets of iron, bushes and blankets.

There they are on the front page of newspapers and on the telly, unkempt, unwashed people in tattered clothing, sitting in the filth, surrounded by mindless piles of rubbish, snotty-nosed kids and diseased dogs. And what is the knee-jerk reaction? Let's build them some houses, poor things.

I was at Wadeye the other day, and was told that house occupancy was at "crisis point" 17 persons per dwelling. But these were cesspits of houses in most cases. The only occupants of the houses, except when it was raining, were dogs, pissing and shitting inside. When it rains, of course, all the people have to huddle inside. And we wonder why they are unhealthy! The answer is not to have outside contractors, at exorbitant cost, build more of the same type of house, with dark interiors and small windows, but to encourage and teach locals to construct meaningful, high-ceilinged shed-frames with windbreaks in appropriate positions, shadecloth sections to combat insects, an appropriate but minimal level of privacy for toilets showers etc, but basically creating large, airy shelters rather than houses, open to the normally benign elements. Shelters that can easily accommodate 17 compatible people happily and harmoniously. It's not taking people backwards, it's returning them to the sound practices they evolved in living in harmony with Nature for centuries.

So we establish a realistic housing program, involving Aboriginal participation. What next?

I know that what I'm about to say is the height of paternalism, and I thought I'd never hear myself say it, but I'd give everybody a decent meal every day. No cost, no strings attached. There goes the dinner bell. Wash your hands. Sit down at a table. Knife and fork. There is a good solid meal available for everybody. Some fruit juice? A couple of these make-you-happy pills? They make you dance better" Any health problems? Wash your utensils afterwards. Thanks. See you tomorrow.

For many Aboriginals are dying from straight-up malnutrition. They are not like prisoners-of-war or Auschwitz survivors, bones showing. On the contrary. The sugar makes you fat. But if they are not getting proper food that to me equals sickness, a health matter.

It would be interesting to know what some individual Aboriginals have to eat in a given period of time. Consider especially the ever-increasing hundreds of itinerant derelicts, the long-grassers of Darwin or the Town Camp dwellers of Alice Springs, Katherine or Tennant Creek. Imagine their day, poor buggers. They wake up, still pissed from yesterday's massive drinking of hot cask wine. If anybody in the group has any money what is going to happen? The money is going on more wine, every cent of it. Will anybody dare to publish the real figures on cask wine consumed in rural Australia? As much cask wine as possible is purchased, people drink it at the frenetic rate required, but does anybody ever have anything to eat? Not much chance.

Is this suicide? Or is it your actual genocide, in that there is a system in place in our land Australia that allows it to happen, a system whose best interest lies in further extensions of the problem, whereby more funds will be available to enable more jobs for concerned whitefellers to conduct surveys, formulate new programs, extract more millions of taxpayer's funds, to preside over the death throes of the First Australian "bushies" in our rural areas, who were, just 100 short years ago, the toughest people on Earth?

In respect of youth suicide — and I haven't even mentioned that — you often hear "If there was a cry for help". Well, today, this is a cry for help, from me to the rest of Australia, to pick up realistically and meaningfully the challenges offered in Aboriginal health in rural Australia. I wonder if there is any Local Government Authority in the region to which I refer (and I guess I'm referring to a land area covering nine tenths of Australia) prepared firstly to acknowledge the level of ill-health of its Aboriginal residents, and secondly, to have the courage to do something about it.

