

MEDIA RELEASE

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Health inequity grows alongside troubling homelessness rates

Many of Australia's leading health organisations will gather at a hostel for homeless men today to call on politicians to get serious about tackling issues like homelessness, education and income levels that are putting a serious strain on the country's health system.

The Social Determinants of Health Alliance (SDoHA), representing more than 50 health, social service and public policy organisations, will push the case for the implementation of the recommendations of a Senate Inquiry tabled in March and remind the public of the social factors that are causing ill health.

"In a rare show of political unity in the last Parliament, Labor, Coalition and Greens senators tabled a joint report almost five months ago that offered a series of important – and no-cost or low-cost – recommendations on how governments could seek to address growing levels of health inequity in Australia," said SDoHA chair Martin Laverty. "We're still waiting for the diligent work of those senators to be implemented."

Mr Laverty said one example of an opportunity lost is Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's pledge in 2008 to halve the rates of homelessness in Australia by 2020.

"That would make huge strides towards improving the health of those people, but figures show the number of people experiencing homelessness has risen by 17 per cent in the past several years," he said.

Other speakers who will address today's public forum include Australian Medical Association president Steve Hambleton, the Hon Rob Knowles of the Mitchell Institute for Health and Education Policy and Australian Council of Social Service deputy CEO Tessa Boyd-Caine.

Dr Boyd-Caine said "Despite Australia's strong economic standing, inadequate incomes for many people mean that insecure housing, mental illness and poor oral health can still signify poverty, disadvantage and isolation. A social determinants approach to health provides two critical drivers to the outcomes we need as a society, enabling Australia to invest in effective, community-based care that supports healthy lives while reducing the growing pressure on hospital and health budgets."

Dr Hambleton said the AMA has for many years urged governments to consider all the social determinants of health – such as housing, employment, education, environment and transport – when developing health policy.

"This is particularly important when considering policies for Indigenous peoples and other disadvantaged group," Dr Hambleton said. "Social and psychological circumstances can cause long-term stress and be damaging to health – and may lead to premature death."

Mr Knowles, the former Victorian Minister for Health, Housing and Aged Care, has been a campaigner on behalf of those with mental health and for the raising of education standards for all Australians.

"The correlation between being able to secure a good education and going on to have a healthy life is very strong, but politicians are only now starting to understand that link and we're still waiting for them to actually do something about it," Mr Knowles said.

"Mental illness is another area that must be addressed urgently, especially in light of a report just last week that showed the life expectancy of those with mental illness hasn't improved in the past 30 years – unlike the life expectancy of those with heart disease and cancer."