

MEDIA RELEASE

UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 1am, November 15, 2013

Medicare Locals on right track: Let's keep people out of hospital

Seeking to keep Australians well and out of hospital would make a major difference to the overall health of the country, but doctors, government leaders and other key decision-makers need to understand how factors like education, employment, housing and economic disadvantage affect people's well-being.

That's the message Social Determinants of Health Alliance (SDoHA) chair Martin Laverty will deliver to the Australian Medicare Local Alliance conference on the Gold Coast today. Mr Laverty said a report carried out by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) proved grim reading for those who want to see a levelling of the health playing field.

"That research shows us that nationally, there could be tens of thousands fewer hospital admissions annually, saving more than \$2.3 billion, if governments around the country were to adopt the recommendations of the 2008 World Health Organisation (WHO) report *Closing the gap in a generation*," he explained.

Mr Laverty said findings from the 2012 NATSEM report suggest that if Australian governments were to implement the three key recommendations of the *Closing the gap in a generation report*, the following outcomes could be achieved:

- 500,000 Australians could avoid suffering a chronic illness;
- 170,000 extra Australians could enter the workforce, generating \$8 billion in extra earnings;
- 60,000 fewer people would need to be admitted to hospital annually, resulting in savings of \$2.3 billion in hospital expenditure.

The Social Determinants of Health Alliance (SDoHA), representing more than 60 health, social service and public policy organisations, was launched in February and is calling for meaningful action on the social determinants of health around the country, starting with the implementation of the WHO's recommendations. Federal Coalition, Labor and Greens senators earlier this year urged their parliamentary colleagues to do just that following a Senate Inquiry that was completed in March.

Mr Laverty said it is encouraging to see Medicare Locals taking the social determinants of health agenda seriously at today's meeting, but he said it is important for the discussion to lead to a change in the way policies are devised and implemented.

"We have seen internationally – and within Australia to a lesser extent – a lot of talk about the need to address health inequity but not as much tangible action to bring about real change," Mr Laverty said. "I am hopeful that this focus on the social determinants of health framework from Medicare Locals might become contagious and lead to the advancement of this agenda, which would be best accelerated by adoption of the recommendations of this year's Senate Inquiry."

Mr Laverty said there are divergent views on the current Commission of Audit, but as the 2012 NATSEM report showed, action on the social determinants can save billions of dollars and provide immeasurable social benefits, so there is a chance to push both the health equity and productivity agendas in the weeks ahead.

"Medicare Locals can play a key role in those efforts, gathering evidence of the effect of the social determinants and bringing the public on board," Mr Laverty said.