



SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH ALLIANCE

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Health inequity grows as Senate report gathers dust

While not a source of surprise, the Social Determinants of Health Alliance has expressed disappointment at there not being any mention in this year's Federal Budget about the shame of increasing rates of health inequity in a country that prides itself on giving everyone a "fair go".

The Social Determinants of Health Alliance (SDOHA), representing more than 40 health, social service and public policy organisations, was launched in February, shortly before the Senate Community Affairs Committee published the findings of its Inquiry into Australia's response to World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations on addressing health inequity.

"It has now been 55 days since the committee tabled its report containing five clear recommendations on what should be done to address the unacceptable levels of health inequity in this country," SDOHA spokesman Martin Laverty said.

"The unanimous report of a committee with representation from across the political spectrum said the Government should start the social determinants ball rolling by adopting the WHO's *Closing the gap in a generation* report and commit to addressing the social determinants of health in a manner that's relevant to the Australian context."

The adoption of that report, considered by many to be the seminal document on health inequity, was one of the Alliance's key priorities as outlined in its submission to the Senate Inquiry. It was also highlighted at the February gathering at which Social Inclusion Minister Mark Butler officially launched SDOHA.

SDOHA spokesman Michael Moore said members of the Alliance understand there are serious fiscal constraints on the Commonwealth, as well as states and territories, in the current environment. One of the beauties of the social determinants of health agenda, though, is that it doesn't necessitate much – if any – spending.

"A great deal can be achieved without any line being added to the Federal Budget," Mr Moore said. "The committee said governments should adopt practices that ensure consideration of the social determinants of health in policy development across all areas. That won't add dollars to the Budget, but would change the way politicians and bureaucrats think about health and the ways in which any policy decision can affect people's health – positively or negatively."

Professor Sharon Friel, a health equity professor at Australian National University and one of the lead advisors to the WHO's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, said September's election mustn't see the health equity agenda shelved.

"With the Government having six months to respond to the Senate Inquiry's report, it could sit on its hands and do nothing," Professor Friel said. "We know Prime Minister Julia Gillard has a strong commitment to fairness and equity, though. We know Minister Mark Butler shares that commitment, and we're confident that the Labor, Greens and Liberal senators who sat on the committee won't want to see their thoughtful recommendations, which will support economic, social and health policy goals, gather dust on a shelf somewhere. Australians deserve better than to see politics and electioneering placed above their well-being."