

June Oscar AO

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Lowitja Institute, International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference

Healing from the Ground Up; How real investments overcome health inequalities

Thank you

I acknowledge the traditional owners and the custodians of the land of which we meet today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.

Opening in Bunuba

At a time when global national powers are more present than ever within our imaginations, it is important to consider the type of nation we want to live in. It is important to consider how everyone can live in the nation we imagine.

The question to consider as I speak today, of particular relevance to this audience, but highly affecting to all of us, is,

What makes a healthy nation?

When it comes to health we have a tendency to think of the individual. To look at ailments, identifiable symptoms, to find a cure. If we can isolate the problem, the condition, then we can resolve it.

But what happens when the health issues occur on mass? At first glance it might seem to be an individual's behaviour - poor diet resulting in diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver caused by alcohol overconsumption, cancer from smoking... the list goes on.

When these symptoms play out across an entire population of people, poor health is not an individual issue. It is a collective phenomenon.

This is the tragedy of Aboriginal ill health that we have normalised, and somehow accepted. Many similar forms of this 'ill health', are reflected in other minority and marginalised groups, across Australia and the world. In other words peoples and populations that do not easily identify with the mainstream narrative of Australian society, and cannot be swiftly incorporated into mainstream policies. Peoples who do not bend and succumb to a one size fits all approach.

We've accepted this inequality between the mainstream and the marginal because we've told a story about good health being determined by the individual.

The evidence defies this reasoning. When sectors of society have entrenched poor health it is not the individual, it is determined by our societal structures. It is about what people do and do not have access to. It is what they haven't had access to over generations. This creates an accumulative inequality.

Today, I'm going to talk about the critical elements needed allowing for good health to flourish within a nation and over time. Not just for some sectors of society, but for every single person across Australia. Because the health of a nation is never about the few, it has to be about all people that call this country home.

For me, a healthy society is one that grows around these principles, what some may call values, or even protocols.

- Inclusivity
- Community cohesion
- Care and nurture
- Reciprocity
- Acceptance, trust and respect
- And a collective responsibility and purpose

We foster, and teach these 'shared ways of being and living', through the construction of the right civic spaces and social institutions. These are our positive social determinants. When we ensure that everyone has access to these institutions, education, health care, sport and recreation centres, parks and the outdoors, and what I will focus on throughout this presentation – early childhood education and care and parent and carer support programs - we increase the likelihood for a strong healthy society.

If we limit access to these institutions across a person's lifetime, the result is clear, we put barriers in a person's way. We make it structurally difficult to achieve a positive and healthy life.

Aboriginal people today are dealing with these outcomes.

The statistics are appalling, we all know them firsthand, I won't go over them at length. It is hard to believe that the figures we hear of Aboriginal people, and this includes incarceration, unemployment and suicide, could be real. That the unimaginable is possible.

It shouldn't be like this. And the truth is it does not need to go on.

The child you see behind me attends Baya Gawiy, our early childhood learning and care centre in Fitzroy Crossing which is operated by Marninwarntikura, the organisation I am CEO of. It is the only early childhood centre in a 260km radius. This child would not have attended Baya Gawiy if current proposed changes to legislation and the way early childhood care is funded by the federal government were in place today. Baya Gawiy wouldn't exist. It wouldn't be financially feasible under proposed government changes to parent and carer fees for early childhood learning and care.

What we are doing at Baya Gawiy is breaking the cycles of inequality. Baya Gawiy is a vital link in the chain of intergenerational health wellbeing and prosperity that we need to grow in this country.

When a child is given the best start in life that child succeeds throughout their life.

That positive chain of reaction sounds something like this,

- their mother has pre-natal and post-natal care,
- parents and carers are supported in maternity and parental programs,
- they can enrol their children in 0-5 full time learning and care,
- that child will go to school ready,
- will maintain good attendance throughout their schooling could go onto higher education,
- and then can seriously choose to be whatever they want to be.

Research shows that children from lower socio-economic contexts are more likely to have this chain reaction set in motion by early childhood education and care than children from wealthier backgrounds. What this tells us is that early childhood education and care is critical to how children grow and respond to the world and contribute to a healthy and prosperous society. When we believe in this, then children are quite literally our hopes and dreams, our belief in a better humanity. They are our investment for the future, as the image behind me says.

So what is the reality of a child not beginning their life like this? It is what we have now. Statistically it is more likely that an Aboriginal child will go to jail than achieve a degree in higher education. Can we look our children in the eyes and explain that this is their future.

The real question is, can any of us, are any of us, prepared to live with this unacceptable reality any longer?

Let's focus on what is acceptable, what we all work for and actually want.

Baya Gawiy is providing our children with a centre which cultivates a collective determination, resilience, and empathy so we can create a rich social fabric that enables and motivates, and does not diminish and inhibit any of our talents, capacities and knowledges from our diverse cultural

heritages.

These centres of learning which bring together the wealth of Indigenous and western knowledge's are essential. Not only because they strengthen our Indigenous identity but most importantly they are simultaneously creating safety and stability in the present, and are eliminating harms in the future. Locally appropriate and community owned early childhood centres are the most effective form of combined crisis intervention and prevention. We cannot afford for changes in policy and legislation to deconstruct their framework.

In vulnerable communities like ours a setback in the health, education and care of our children is disastrous. Once again we would be left in a precarious position with no structural supports to enable us to overcome inequality.

Wherever we turn social determinants are the leading cause of poor life outcomes. In the Fitzroy Valley people have come together to change those social determinants. To know that a better future for the health of all is possible when we give our children the best start in life.

Not one child should to be left out of this future reality.

Before I go on let me be clear. This is certainly about making sure we secure essential services, but most importantly, overcoming inequality is about ending discrimination in our social services system.

It is not a matter of mainstreaming.

When we look at models like Baya Gawiy we've constructed them around the values of the healthy society I mentioned earlier, and the strengths and intergenerational resiliencies of Indigenous society.

To truly overcome inequality our social service system has to embrace us all. Health cannot be achieved without a structure of inclusivity which honours and respects the immensity of Indigenous knowledge and the protocols that have sustained our society as the longest living civilization on earth.

We have seen what happens when our identities are denied. When who we are is not reflected in the very institutions that are meant to bring about our prosperity and health.

This has been the history of our existence within the western nation state of Australia.

We have to realise that the poor health we are dealing with now is a symptom of the colonial legacy of years of systemic disadvantage and unresolved trauma. This trauma is perhaps the most severe

outcome of exclusion to the national narrative, the most impacting social determinate we have on our health.

In the Fitzroy Valley we continue to spend time understanding what trauma looks like and how we can overcome it. Many of you will know of the movement led by the women in my community to restrict the sale of full strength alcohol. This was in response to our community attending 50 funerals in 12 months. This included 13 suicides. Many deaths were in young people and most were alcohol-related.

Many of you would also know that following this we embarked on Australia's first prevalence study of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. We found that 1 in 5 children had one of the fetal alcohol spectrum disorders – one of the highest prevalence rates in the world.

These children have a range of challenging behaviours and unique and complex needs. Overall these difficult behaviours predispose these children to school failure, contact with the juvenile justice and ongoing risk of incarceration.

This was all the evidence we needed to prove that trauma as a social determinant of health had become a permanent imprint in the physiological and psychological makeup of our people.

So when I talk about institutions responding to inequalities it is this that I am also talking about.

What our children deserve is equal access and it is making sure our services are fully prepared and able to respond to the unique and complex needs that have arisen from intergenerational trauma and cumulative inequality.

Despite all of this. Despite all our efforts and the national and international significance of our work we are not getting the support we need.

We still do not have the long-term security of funding required to enable this work to continue into the future.

Baya Gawiy has no guarantee of funding beyond July 2017. If nothing changes we will have to close its doors. And this is just a policy gap. By July 2018 the federal government wants to introduce the 'jobs for families childcare package', this legislation has been challenging for us to understand as it proposes to benefit vulnerable families in particular. In fact it does the opposite, it undercuts vulnerable families. It is all about mainstreaming and fundamentally denying the history of inequality we have suffered.

- It reduces subsidised access for people earning less than 65,000 per annum

- If parents and carers do not work or participate in what the government considers 'societal activities', then the child is punished, by reducing childcare subsidies to 20 hours per fortnight.
- And for families working full time their annual childcare cost per child will be \$30,000 after government subsidies. Families using Baya Gawiy can have many children in care at once, taking their total costs up to 90,000 plus annually.
- Independent reviews of this package has said that these changes would not be feasible for Baya Gawiy to implement.
- Overall, under the jobs for families childcare package Baya Gawiy would have a \$500,000 deficit out of an annual budget of 1.2 million.

Our doors would shut, our preventative measures would lose investment. We would remain in a state of crisis with no pathway out.

Our children would continue to face the unimaginable.

Again we have to ask ourselves, can we stand by and let this continue? For the sake of all our children and the future health of this nation, can we really stand by?

Today, let us all say no. let us all reject the unimaginable and achieve what is possible.

In conferences like this there is immense power and motivation because here lies the knowledge and expertise that we need to make a difference to our social service system. The wealth of knowledge here makes change palpable. I think it's appropriate on the eve of the most significant global election that we realise our community of expertise is not subject to the political whims of raucous rally.

Our expertise and lived experience and what we want to achieve is not controlled by a politics of fear. Inequality fractures our society, it undermines our civic institutions, it diminishes the values that create a healthy society, it excludes rich and multiple heritages, and it silences me and you from determining the future our children deserve.

What we have done in the Fitzroy Valley proves that it can all be different. We have shown that the best of western science and the best of western research methodologies can be merged with Aboriginal cultural values and social imperatives. The equation of this connection – western and Indigenous 'know how', expertise and wisdom should come together in a solution finding commitment to embrace equality and target investment in what will set us on a path that is simultaneously nation changing and enhancing.

The power of knowledge and evidence does this. When we commit to best practice and its implementation across a nation, then we reject fear. We accept one another and demand that policies are more responsive and open to the complexity of regional differences and to the real needs of populations.

This brings me to the 'jobs for families childcare package' bill that will go before parliament in November.

It needs amendment and we have to insist that no bill like this which entrenches inequality is passed.

Let's unite as a community dedicated to decisions and investments that are informed by the evidence. Let us all insist on investing in our future with the full knowledge that an inclusive equal society is good for the health of this nation.

We can make politics accountable to us. When the world has leaders who shame and blame, we must stand strong, reject this post fact era and remember it is never a few individuals that make a nation, we make this nation, and it is all of our health that matters.