

Media Release

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“It’s the social determinants, stupid!”

Fred Chaney and Fran Baum, two of Australia’s most eloquent and passionate advocates for the social determinants of health, reminded delegates at the 10th National Rural Health Conference of the vital contribution of education and social status to an individual’s health.

Fred Chaney focused on the challenges of governance and providing services for remote Australia. “If it was not for beacons of success like the Katherine West Health Board, remote Australia could be seen as a ‘failed state’,” Mr Chaney said. “Why else would the Government have needed to intervene in the Northern Territory in the way it did?”

Mr Chaney expressed concern with the scope and complexities of the work of the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission. “I fear that it may have bitten off so much, and is trying to deal with it in an all-encompassing way, that government may find its proposals impossible to deal with,” he said.

“What is needed is a commitment from government to hand matters over to appropriate regions – to let them manage their own consultation and engagement on health issues,” Mr Chaney said. “This may take time locally – as it did at Katherine West – but government can make the decision immediately to start down this path.”

Fran Baum, Professor of Public Health at Flinders University, received acclamation at the Conference for her powerful message about the social gradient and its effect on health.

“Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale. We all know how pointless it is to treat someone and then send them home to the very environment that made them sick in the first place,” Professor Baum said.

Professor Baum emphasised that the social gradient can be changed by advocacy and political action. “It is not a given that some in our society have to remain poor, powerless and unwell,” she said.

Monique Bégin, a former Canadian Health Minister, also urged the rural and remote health sector to continue to stand up for itself and be loudly heard.

“You have a critical mass of 30 per cent of the population so your case should be heard,” Ms Bégin said. She challenged the sector to build stronger links with agriculture and other rural industries, with teachers and the education sector, vets and private business.

“Maybe this Conference and the Alliance that runs it will have an even broader base next time I’m invited,” she said.

Further Contact

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