



Aboriginal Health Council
of South Australia Inc.

'Our health, our choice, our way'

MEDIA RELEASE

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WA Death Highlights Aboriginal People More Vulnerable to Swine Flu

Mrs Mary Buckskin, CEO of the Aboriginal Health Council of SA Inc. today expressed condolences to the family of the young Aboriginal man from Kiwirrkura in WA who died last week in the Royal Adelaide Hospital and highlighted that Aboriginal people suffer more from chronic health problems and so are more vulnerable to swine flu.

Mrs Buckskin said, "Although the young man from WA was diagnosed with swine flu, it is still unclear what role this played in his death as he had major underlying health problems. This does, however, highlight the fact that many Aboriginal people suffer from chronic health problems which will make them more vulnerable to swine flu.

"Because of the significantly higher rates of chronic diseases including diabetes, kidney disease and lung disease in our communities, we are concerned that we will have higher rates of severe and complicated flu, and possibly more deaths, than in the wider community," she said.

For those Aboriginal people without chronic diseases, Mrs Buckskin expects that most, if they contract swine flu, will probably only suffer from a short mild illness.

The Aboriginal Health Council has been supporting Aboriginal Health Services in SA to prepare for managing swine flu cases. Mrs Buckskin notes that the high transmissibility of the swine flu virus, which is now spreading in various parts of Australia, means it is likely that cases will soon present to Aboriginal Health Services across South Australia.

The South Australian Aboriginal Health Partnership has provided some funds to employ an experienced nurse consultant, Ms Mary-Anne Williams, to assist health services with preparation. Ms Williams will be working with staff at Pika Wiya Health Service in Port Augusta this week and with other health services in coming weeks.

The Aboriginal Health Council has also been working closely with SA Health and arrangements have been made to ensure there are stocks of anti-viral medications in remote Aboriginal Health Services.

Mrs Buckskin expressed concern that Aboriginal Health Services employ dedicated Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff but these health workers are already stretched to maximum hours with just providing primary health care to meet the day-to-day health needs of their communities. "The increased workload which will occur when significant numbers of people develop flu will put extra strain on our services and we should remember that staff themselves can get sick. It may be necessary to ask the government to provide resources to employ extra back-up health staff to help with the workload," she said.

Mrs Buckskin expressed hope that the swine flu pandemic will not lead to a widening of the gap in life-expectancy in 2009. "We are doing what we can to minimise the impact of swine flu and will monitor the situation carefully," she said.

AHCSA is South Australia's peak body for Aboriginal health. As an Aboriginal community controlled organisation, AHCSA is managed and governed by an Aboriginal Board comprising members from Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, Substance Misuse Services and Aboriginal Health Advisory Committees who represent the interests of the communities through AHCSA at a state and national level.

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