

REPORT OF CO-MEDICAL DIRECTOR DR. BILL ROBERTS

1978 proved to be a very pleasing year with respect to the increasing value placed on the Health Service by the Community, and the dramatic increase in the number of patients using the service. Many of these patients presented with chronic health conditions requiring constant attention, but prior to attending the Health Service rarely saw Doctors. This proves that the need for primary Medical care is of continuing importance for the total Victorian community, but it does not remove our determination to present a parallel equally effective preventive medicine programme - a programme which springs from the awareness of the Aboriginal people in the community who are in touch with the needs, live amongst and suffer those needs themselves, and who realise that the solution can only come from themselves. They see that the solution cannot be provided by a Government expert - financial, medical, dental, or whatever - who is not in touch with the community, but who thinks he knows what's best for the people.

Dr. Malcolm Dobbin's report has covered the medical aspects of our work and our intended programmes. It is necessary for me to reflect on the financial and political aspects of the problems facing the Health Service. In these areas 1978 has proved to be a very frustrating and difficult year. It is a very great pity that the right to proper health care for the Aboriginal people has to be involved with political battling. But this is a fact of life, and today we are seeing Aboriginal organisations being used and abused as political footballs in the same way that Aboriginal people and families have been used and abused in the past. The organisations are only as strong as the people who staff them and support them, and so if the people hope to see the continuance of these services, they will have to show a commitment to fighting to see that they are preserved with total Aboriginal management and proper financing from a Government, which wants to slide out of its responsibilities to our Aboriginal people.

The struggle for the past three years has been to obtain from the Commonwealth Government the funding necessary to continue the Service at its existing level, and to push for those funds which will enable us to really tackle all those areas of preventive medicine e.g., nutritional programmes, health worker training programmes, and hearing-screening programme, which are all vitally necessary if we are to begin to turn the corner leading to a healthier future. But, I emphasise again, the community must stand together as one behind their organisations and all of these things will be achieved.

At the moment the Government wishes to subvert the 1967 Referendum, when the Australian people believed that they had voted to make the Commonwealth Govt. responsible for the affairs of Aboriginal people, and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was set up in response to that decision. Now, the Government is trying to rid itself of that responsibility, and the current financial pressures on the Health Service with lack of proper funding are the result.

We have always avoided asking the public directly for donations, and we have avoided asking Aid Agencies for funding because the Aboriginal people have a right to proper health care from Commonwealth and State Government funding. They should not be given just hand-outs from some sections of the Australian public through the good-will of that section, they should receive adequate and proper health care as a right.

However, because we have been ignored in our constant pleas by our submissions to the Commonwealth Government for sufficient funding, we may have to think of seeking the short fall elsewhere - but only the short fall, and only until Governments, both Federal and State, come to realise their responsibilities in justice to our oppressed peoples.

As an indication of the current attitude, we look to a statement by the new Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Chaney, in which he says that the Aboriginal people of Victoria and N.S.W. have almost "made it". We must ask the question, "what does he mean by 'made it?'". If he is thinking in financial terms, or health terms, or educational terms, or housing terms, or legal service terms, let him spend a day in Gertrude Street, a day at Lake Tyers, a day in Morwell, a day at Dareton, a day in Redfern, or a day in Bourke - to say nothing of all our other communities - then ask him if he thinks we've made it.

In this report I have not differentiated between the Health Service and the Dental Service because the terms of this report apply to both (see separate Dental Service report.)

Included with this report is our last press release which gives an up-to-date picture of the very difficult situation the Health and Dental services face at the moment.

We will only overcome these difficulties with the support of the whole community. If one organisation goes under they will certainly be "gunning" for the remainder.

I personally have high hopes of a more optimistic report in twelve months time. I can say that because of the commitment and the nature of the people I have worked with in this past twelve months - the total health team, black and white, the administration and the directors.

NEWS RELEASE

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL HEALTH SERVICE ANNOUNCED TODAY THAT THE HEALTH AND DENTAL SERVICES WOULD CONTINUE TO OPERATE BECAUSE OF THE MAJOR PERSONAL SACRIFICES BEING MADE BY THE STAFF OF THE SERVICE. MR. MC GUINNESS EXPLAINED THAT DUE TO THE CURRENT FINANCIAL CRISIS FACED BY THE SERVICE, ALL STAFF HAD BEEN RETRENCHED. BUT, HE SAID, EVERY PERSON ON THE STAFF HAD DECIDED TO CONTINUE WORKING WITHOUT PAY IN ORDER THAT THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY WOULD NOT BE LEFT WITHOUT ADEQUATE HEALTH SERVICES. MR. MC GUINNESS STATED THAT THIS ACTION BY THE STAFF WAS INDICATIVE OF THEIR DEDICATION AND LOYALTY TO THE COMMUNITY WHOM THEY SERVE. HE SAID THAT THE SITUATION FACED BY THE SERVICE WAS ALMOST UNPRECEDENTED, BUT THAT ALL THE STAFF ARE PREPARED TO CONTINUE WORKING ON A VOLUNTARY BASIS FOR THE SIX WEEKS UNTIL EARLY APRIL.

ON THAT DATE THE SERVICE WOULD RECEIVE ITS NORMAL FOURTH QUARTER GRANT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS WHICH THEORETICALLY WOULD COVER OPERATIONS OF THE SERVICE FOR A PERIOD OF THREE MONTHS .

UNFORTUNATELY THOSE MONIES WILL DO LITTLE ELSE BUT COVER THE EXISTING OVERDRAFT WITH THE COMMONWEALTH BANK. THEREFORE FROM THE FIRST OF APRIL UNTIL THE END OF THE FINANCIAL YEAR, THE VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL HEALTH SERVICE WOULD CONTINUE TO OPERATE WITH SKELETON STAFF ONLY SUPPLEMENTED BY VOLUNTARY HELPERS. THIS WOULD MEAN AN EFFECTIVE REDUCTION OF APPROXIMATELY 50% IN STAFF LEVELS OF THE SERVICE.

BOARD MEMBERS OF THE SERVICE MET FOR SEVERAL HOURS WITH OFFICIALS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS TO DISCUSS THE CRISIS. MR. MC GUINNESS SAID THAT THE DISCUSSIONS WERE FRUITFUL IN THE SENSE THAT IT HAD BEEN THE FIRST REAL OPPORTUNITY THAT THE V.A.H.S. HAD BEEN GIVEN TO FULLY INFORM THE DEPARTMENT OF THE CURRENT CRISIS AND THE REASONS FOR IT. FURTHERMORE THE SERVICE WAS ABLE TO CLEARLY EXPLAIN THE ACTIONS THAT WE, AS AN AUTONOMOUS ORGANISATION, HAVE BEEN ABLE TO INITIATE IN ORDER TO COPE WITH THE CRISIS. HE SAID THAT DESPITE BEING INFORMED OF THE MEASURES VOLUNTARILY ADOPTED BY STAFF, THE DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS WERE UNABLE TO OFFER ANY FORM OF IMMEDIATE MONETARY ASSISTANCE. MR. MC GUINNESS STATED THAT HE FELT THAT THE DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS HAD, PRIOR TO THE MEETING, NOT BEEN FULLY AWARE OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH CREATED THE CURRENT CRISIS, BUT THAT AFTER THE MEETING THEY HAD REALISED THAT THE VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL HEALTH SERVICE WAS NOT TO BLAME FOR THE SITUATION IT NOW FACED, AND THEY APPEARED SYMPATHETIC TO THE V.A.H.S. PROBLEMS.

INFORMATION RELAYED TO THE OFFICIALS AT THE MEETING WILL BE PRESENTED TO THE MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS IN A REPORT PREPARED BY THE D.A.A. , AND THE SERVICE EXPECTS A POSITIVE RESPONSE FROM SENATOR CHANEY IN THE NEAR FUTURE. MR. MC GUINNESS ALSO SAID THAT THE SERVICE EXPECTS THE MINISTER TO TAKE ACTION ON THE FORMAL COMPLAINT MADE BY THE SERVICE ABOUT THE RELEASING OF INACCURATE INFORMATION BY A DEPARTMENTAL OFFICIAL TO A SECTION OF THE PRESS EARLIER THIS MONTH.

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS.

MR. MC GUINNESS CONCLUDED, ' FOR THE HEALTH SERVICE TO CONTINUE TO OPERATE, WE ARE CALLING FOR VOLUNTEER PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL STAFF TO OFFER THEIR ASSISTANCE TO THE SERVICE, IN ORDER THAT THE FULL RANGE OF OPERATIONS MAY CONTINUE. WE WOULD ALSO APPRECIATE DONATIONS OF PHARMACEUTICALS, BASIC MEDICAL SUPPLIES, AND CASH DONATIONS IN ORDER THAT THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY OF VICTORIA IS NOT DEPRIVED OF THEIR RIGHT TO THE ADEQUATE SERVICES THEY DESERVE'