

Statement to Senate Select Committee Inquiry hearing, Katherine 20 June 2009 - Irene Fisher, CEO, Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation

Good morning before I begin today I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and elders for the land on which we meet - I thank the Senate Committee for the Inquiry they are holding into the important issue of the impact of the Northern Territory Intervention into—among things—Aboriginal health.

I hope this day and all the remaining inquiry days mark a momentous occasion - the freedom of Aboriginal people from the confines of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act and its' intervention.

In particular I would thank you for coming to Katherine. For many of us living in regional Australia, it sometimes seems to us that Canberra is “a remote community”, so I would like for that reason to welcome you here to Katherine which is—at least for us living here—the capital of our region here in the Territory.

Sunrise Health Service has forwarded a Submission to the Senate committee, but I would like to say a few brief words—after which I am happy to assist your committee where I can, and answer what questions I am able.

It seems to me the key questions the Senate is here to answer are simply the following:

- did the Intervention achieve what it set out to do?
- if not wholly successful, what are the elements of the Intervention that are working, and worth continuing to pursue? and what elements of the Intervention are not working, and need to be abandoned or changed?

First, whatever else might have motivated the instigation of the Intervention, it had very little to do with any new evidence suddenly becoming available in June 2007 to warrant such urgent action. Urgent action had been requested by Aboriginal people—individuals and organisations—for four decades leading up to the announcement of the National Emergency.

These requests have covered health, education, housing, employment, enterprise and community safety; they have been subject of countless reports and inquiries—including by the Commonwealth parliament. They have been subject of countless fine words and promises, but little in the way of positive, sustainable action and results.

In a sense, then, there was nothing new ... as Aboriginal people we have heard it all before. If anything, in a number of key sectors, things have been getting worse over the years. I would make the point, then, that we have been calling for interventions on many occasions before 21 June 2007.

Second—and as our Submission points out—there are good and bad aspects of the NTER. We welcome—in particular—the increased allocations of resources into Aboriginal primary health care through the NTER, and which were confirmed in the recent Commonwealth Budget.

There are other elements of the NTER which we reject, examples include the extensive breadth of powers under the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007* and the associated legislation package including land tenure arrangements and housing both of which are linked social determinants. The powers of the GBM over community service entities. The prescribing of communities and the powers over seizure of assets. Also of concern is the displacement of Aboriginal people into homelessness as the impact of the alcohol restrictions are felt about Town. Also spot searches are conducted by Police regularly and routinely - Aboriginal people are constantly stopped and searched - this type of marshalling under a blanket approach will not work.

Today I will speak about the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and the universal imposition of income management as the two most obvious.

My reasons for saying this are very simple—and not at all ideological.

They are that measures taken must work—and must work sustainably. In other words, the measures we take must be *evidence based*, and not based on ideological whim, or passing fancy. They must be *evidence based*, and not based on tabloid simplifications, or cheap rhetoric.

In primary health care, for example, we operate on the evidence available to us, and take action on that basis. I don't suggest this is simple. Indeed, “silver bullet” solutions can often be illusory because they cannot be sustained over time. Sometimes—indeed often—the evidence we have is

very complex, with very complex measures to be undertaken over a considerable time.

I'm not alone in this. A simple Google Search yesterday linked the words "evidence based" with that of the names of Kevin Rudd 20,500 times; and with that of Jenny Macklin 2,730 times. Julia Gillard scored 5,240 times, beaten to the post by Malcolm Turnbull with 5,450.

Clearly the use of evidence is, and must be, the basis of policy and practice that works ... and out leading politicians recognise this.

Obviously, the linking of the words "evidence based", and the politicians I named, did not all apply to the Northern Territory Intervention—which indeed only scored 1,790 hits in that regard. Most of them, I might add, in the negative.

But it is the linking of evidence—of what works, and what doesn't work—that will assist the Senate, I believe, in answering those simple questions I put to you a few minutes ago:

what are the elements of the Intervention that are working, and worth continuing to pursue? and what elements of the Intervention are not working, and need to be abandoned or changed?

My third point is this, whatever might arise from your Inquiry in the area of recommendations should look to things that will work *sustainably*. "Short termism" has been the hallmark of so much that has been wrong with Aboriginal affairs policy for decades.

Remember, when the Intervention was announced it was said by the former minister to last no more than a year, and the then Prime Minister said it would only cost "a few tens of millions". On the face of it, the Intervention's original design was as the ultimate piece of "short termism".

It has not proved to be the case.

The evidence—which has been there for all of us to see—has been around for decades. The real task into the future will be to abandon the cheap so-called fixes of "short termism", and work for generational change for our people.

That's been our aim at Sunrise Health Service. Look around you, Senators. A little over 11 years ago, this whole town—and that of many

Aboriginal communities in the region—were under water with the Australia Day floods. You can see how these places have been re-built after that week of devastation.

Our job is to re-build the lives of Aboriginal people, after generations of devastation.

Thank you.

1,116 words, about 8.5 minutes