

25 October 2021

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

RE: COVID VACCINATION UPTAKE IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

We write as a group of Indigenous leaders and health professionals to express our gravest concerns at the continuing low levels of COVID-19 vaccine uptake by most of our communities, and to ask that we meet to determine how Australian Governments and representatives of our people can agree on a way forward that prevents any more serious harm to our people in this pandemic.

All Governments have acknowledged that the results of the Delta Variant getting into Indigenous communities with low vaccination rates could be catastrophic. The public warning by our highly respected cultural leaders, Djambawa Marawili AM, Barayuwa Mununggurr, Maxine Charlie and others around the country, of the deaths and loss of culture if COVID-19 spreads in remote Aboriginal communities, has filled us with dread and motivated us to have our concerns put on the record.

To its credit, your Government and National Cabinet recognised the vulnerability of our communities from the start of the pandemic and adopted several successful measures to protect our people. These measures were designed and implemented in genuine partnership with the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector.

Likewise, it was agreed by Australian Governments that our communities should be a high priority for vaccines at the commencement of their rollout. Despite the efforts of the Aboriginal Community Controlled health sector, including the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), we have unfortunately not seen the same levels of vaccination achieved in our communities as in the wider population. We understand this is due to a range of factors including vaccine hesitancy arising from real cultural concerns and lack of information in many cases, as well as more sinister misinformation campaigns in others.

We are also conscious that COVID outbreaks in Indigenous communities are considered to be inevitable by State and Territory governments. However, we understand that there are currently no realistic or actionable contingency plans to deal with such incidents that have been agreed with our Community Controlled Health sector and Indigenous experts.

It is evident that quarantine is currently near-impossible for those in overcrowded housing, as well as those without ready access to food, grocery and pharmaceutical delivery services. Moreover, rural and regional medical centres and hospitals lack the technical and human resources available in metropolitan centres and would be quickly overwhelmed if even a small number of COVID patients should require inpatient care. Compounding these risks are the lack of adequate capabilities to evacuate seriously ill COVID patients to locations where they can receive the care they require.

Experienced Indigenous epidemiologists and other health professionals, along with community leaders around the country, have been calling for immediate action through a renewed and coordinated strategic approach and community engagement strategies to immediately redress the current gaps. In this regard, we cannot emphasise strongly enough the importance of working closely

with the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector on this issue. The work they have done to vaccinate our people to date has doubtless saved lives, but to vaccinate the remaining Indigenous population at the pace required to achieve full protection prior to nationwide easing of restrictions they will need to agree on the strategy and also be provided with significantly more logistical assistance from all Australian governments.

The most important initiative that needs to commence now is the development and publication of an agreed strategy including milestones between all Governments, the Aboriginal Community Controlled health sector and other Indigenous experts that seeks to achieve the highest possible vaccination rates in our communities, and which includes contingency plans for the inevitable COVID outbreaks over the coming months. It is this more than anything else, and particularly its publication, which will give Indigenous leaders and their communities some assurance that our peoples can be fully involved in overcoming the existential threats that the pandemic poses to us.

We respectfully request a meeting with you and Ministers Hunt and Wyatt as soon as practicable to discuss our concerns and to work with you to consider the propositions we have put forward in this letter. A copy of this letter has also been forwarded to your Ministers.

My Executive Assistant, Luka Gray (luka.gray@anu.edu.au), can be contacted to make any meeting arrangements.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Peter Yu AM
Vice President, First Nations
Australian National University

On behalf of:

Djambawa Marawili AM	Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Aboriginal Artists Corporation
Barayuwa Mununggurr	Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation
Gibson Farmer Illortaminni	Tiwi Land Council
Maxine Charlie	Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Aboriginal Artists Corporation
Prof Marcia Langton AO	School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne
Gordon Cole	G Cole Consulting
A/Prof Colin Saltmere AM	Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, University of Queensland
Nigel Browne	Larrakia Development Corporation
A/Prof Ray Lovett	Australian National University
Tyronne Garstone	Kimberley Land Council
Ricky Archer	North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance
Dr Jill Guthrie	Australian National University
A/Prof Lisa Whop	Australian National University
Peter Windie	Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation
Natalie Parker	Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

Ivan Simon	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association
Tom Slockee	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Association
Sam Backo	North Queensland Aboriginal Land Council
Damian Griffis	First Peoples Disability Network
June Riemer	First Peoples Disability Network
Keith Thomas	South Australian Native Title Services
Fiona Jose	Cape York Partnership
Jamie Lowe	National Native Title Council