

Aborigines at Papunya to run own health service

From JACK WATERFORD, a consultant to the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress

ALICE SPRINGS: The people of Papunya in the course of user-control community-health systems received a significant boost yesterday when the Department of Aboriginal Affairs gave an unequivocal commitment to a proposal for a health service run by the Papunya people themselves.

The commitment was given by a first assistant secretary of the department, Mr Charles Perkins, after a mass meeting at Papunya, 250 kilometres west of Alice Springs, had rejected a series of Department of Health alternatives designed to forestall the proposal.

The breakthrough was a blow to attempts by the Department of Health to retain control over Aboriginal health services. The director, Northern Territory, of the Department of Health, Dr Charles Gurd, told the meeting that the resolution was contrary to Health Department policy and that he would have to go back to his department and his Minister for instructions.

'Satisfied'

But Mr Perkins had already told the community that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was satisfied that the proposed body, to be known as the Lyappa Congress Health Service, was what the people wanted, and that his department would fund it.

"The DAA's mind is now made up; we will support you", he told the meeting. "It will be your health service. It is up to you to make it work. If you have problems they will be your problems and you will have to make up

your own minds about the answers.

"We are going away now. You people are here all the time. Only you can make this work.

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"The Lyappa congress can do it. There is no reason why not. It is done all over the rest of the world.

"But nothing will change if you do not run it yourselves. You can employ anyone you like, but you will be the boss. If you have white employees they will work for you and must do what you say.

"This is Aboriginal country. It is not white country. It belonged to the Aboriginal people long before the white man came and will belong to you long after they go".

The Lyappa congress scheme was devised more than three years ago when the Department of Health commissioned the senior medical officer of the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Dr Trevor Cutter, to talk to the people of Papunya about alternative health services.

Papunya, which has appalling ill health, is served by about three nursing sisters and is visited by a doctor for about two days a month. Serious cases are taken to the Alice Springs Hospital. Most observers consider the endemic ill health to be a result of the environmental conditions.

Dr Cutter's scheme, drawn up after much concentration, called for the appointment of a doctor to the settlement and for the training of Aboriginal health workers to be the basic health agents. Tribal healers, known as ngangkari, also will be used.

Central to the scheme was the idea that the community control the service, not an outside body. The congress will have a full-time director and will be controlled by a community council.

Dr Cutter's proposal was strongly resisted by Health Department officials. They said the system of community control might break down, leaving the

might break down, leaving the Health Department "holding the baby", and argued that the development of the scheme might lead to duplication of resources.

At the meeting yesterday, Dr Gurd sought to keep the system in the settlement under Health Department control, telling the meeting that the sisters could work with the Lyappa congress but that there should be a departmental presence on the settlement.

Control

All the speakers at the meeting told him that they wanted the sisters to be under the community's control. They also wanted the \$3 million hospital on the settlement under congress control.

At stake for the Health Department is control over the \$20 million a year spent by the Federal Government on Aboriginal health in the Northern Territory. Most of this now goes through the department; less than \$1 million a year goes through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to organisations such as the CAAC.

With schemes such as at Papunya, however, the money will go out of the department's hands. And, though Dr Gurd assured all that his department had the same priority as everyone

else, the improvement of Aboriginal health, there is no doubt that this money would be spent with different priorities in mind.

For example, about half of the department's budget goes into maintaining hospital facilities. Others argue that the money would be better spent improving health "on the ground" so that there is not such a great need for hospital treatment.

Although a number of Aboriginal-controlled health services have already been funded, including one run by the CAAC itself, and another, with CAAC

including one run by the Centre itself, and another, with CAAC support, at Utopia, 250 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs, Papunya will be the first discrete community to be funded for its own service.

Other communities will be watching the Papunya service closely and can be expected to follow.

Yesterday's meeting was also attended by the Northern Territory Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Mr Neville Perkins (ALP), who, as a former director of the CAAC, helped with the preparation and development of the Papunya proposals.

He said, "This is a historic day. We have fought very hard for this. It is in line with government policy that the receivers of services should have the say about the level and sort of services they get.

"The meeting today showed that the people of Papunya know what they want. They said so clearly. The development of this scheme will be a terrific boost to Papunya — the first time they will have a say in their own affairs. It will spread into other areas quickly.