

Land and Health at Gove - some points

- Aboriginal people in NE Arnhem Land have been constantly asserting for decades and decades that human health and the health of country are intertwined - they are one and the same thing. Destroy country and you will destroy the health of people. They said it in evidence at the Senate Committee hearings in 1973 when they opposed the mine opening here. At that time all Yolngu leaders spoke strongly, with one voice. They said it would turn their beloved sacred sites into a moonscape, and would destroy Melville Bay - which had been an important larder for food and resources for thousands and thousands of years.

And just look at the Gove Peninsula now - everything which Yolngu leaders (including Galarrwuy's father) predicted in the 1970s has come true. It is no wonder Yolngu get sick when this country is so sick.

- In 1979 Yolngu leaders wrote in a letter to the Prime Minister that:

"We are deeply shocked at the result of the recent court case. We cannot be satisfied with anything less than ownership of the land ... We are worried that without the land future generations would not maintain our culture ... This place does not belong to the white man. They only want it for the money they can make. They will destroy the plants, animal life and culture of the people."

If you visitors to the Garma Festival look at Nhulunbuy and the mine site today, you will see that this is true. Do

you think it is any wonder that Yolngu get sick, when their country is so sick ?

- But of course the Commonwealth Government has never listened to Yolngu. And still today, Yolngu have no legal say over the land where the mine is and where Nhulunbuy is. That is land which the Commonwealth Government took from Yolngu and leased to the mining company. And both the Government and mining company have repeatedly refused - for the past 40 years - to give it back. It is a real mess. I am sure Galarrwuy can tell you more about that story if you ask him.
- Now, for you balanda visitors to Garma, you need to know about Aboriginal land and spirits. Yolngu will tell you about Galka. These are spirits which live in the bush. They can make a lot of trouble. Yolngu will tell you that if Aboriginal people are on their own country, and if kinship relationships are done the proper way, Galka will stay away - they will not make trouble. But if people are not on their country, then kinship will be wrong - because relationships come from the land. And this is when Galka come out and make people sick and cause deaths.
- Now some balanda laugh at this idea of Galka. But Yolngu have the evidence on their side. At the small homeland settlements in this region, Galka usually keep quiet. And at homeland centres there is western scientific evidence that people are much healthier than people who live at the ex-missions, where people and kinship is all mixed up.
- At the small homeland centres in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people live much longer and have much lower rates of all the chronic diseases, like diabetes and cardiovascular disease, than Aboriginal people who live at

the big ex-missions like Yirrkala or Galiwinku. Balanda say this is because people at homelands eat better and get more exercise. But Yolngu know it is because they are on their proper country and kinship is done the right way.

- The point I am making is that land and health are intertwined not only in an Aboriginal sense but also in a western scientific sense. Yolngu leaders and western doctors agree on this: the evidence is that land and health are connected.
- But it seems that no-one has told this to Prime Minister John Howard or his mate Mal Brough. The current Australian Government has said it will finish off homeland centres. They are refusing, as government policy, to build any more houses at homelands, and they will not support people who want to move out of the big sick communities to go back to live at the homelands, on their own country. A recent Government Minister described homeland centres as "cultural museums". This is nothing less than racism.
- Now what sort of stupid Government policy is it that says "we want to improve the health of Aboriginal people", yet at the same time is trying to destroy the one thing which evidence shows does bring better health outcomes?? This one thing is the homelands movement. Here at Miwatj Health we can only shake our heads in dismay at this short-sighted, ignorant and racist policy of the Government.
- So, what is the role of an Aboriginal health service in this situation? Of course we employ doctors and nurses and health workers, we use western science, and we provide western medicine. But is that enough?

- Well, we don't think it is enough. Like all people, Aboriginal people have a basic human right to health care. If Yolngu need to talk to a doctor, we are here so they can do that. But Yolngu also have a basic human right to land. Like I said earlier, the right to health and the right to land are intertwined.

So it is part of the business of Miwatj Health to support land rights for Yolngu, because this is the same as supporting health rights for Yolngu.

- Now, I can't leave without making some points about health services for Aboriginal people in this region.
- I have been in Gove for a long time, for years - but I have only been with Miwatj Health for less than one year. So I have been learning about how the health scene operates. And I am appalled at what I have found out.
- It is obvious that health service provision by the Northern Territory Government to Yolngu communities in this region is little more than a bad joke. Health services which people in cities take for granted simply do not exist in almost all Yolngu communities in this region.
- If you live in Milingimbi, forget about seeing a doctor. If you live in Gapuwiyak, forget about seeing a physiotherapist. If you are a diabetic living in Yirrkala, forget about seeing a dietician. I could go on and on. But if you live in Darwin, you not only get all these services - you also get a Wave Pool !!
- And what about the Commonwealth Government ? In the past few months, Miwatj Health has been refused

Commonwealth funds to employ an ear health team - in a region where the majority of children have ear and hearing problems - and a range of other badly-needed positions. The Commonwealth Government has no strategy to tackle illness among Aboriginal people in this region.

- It amazes me that in 2007, after all the publicity about the crisis in Aboriginal health, the Commonwealth still has no strategy for dealing with one of the sickest groups of people in Australia. They haven't got a clue what to do. They just muddle on, and put most of their effort into bureaucratic paper-shuffling rather than rolling up their sleeves and getting involved. It is the bean counters who run health policy for the Commonwealth Government, and the bean counters are not interested in improving health.
- Speaking of bean counting, the experts say it would cost an extra \$450 million for the Commonwealth Government to fund all Aboriginal health services in Australia properly, to give them the funds so they can do the job they were set up for. The Government regularly has budget surpluses of billions of dollars. Yet do you think they will devote just a small portion of this to funding all Aboriginal health services so they can actually fix the problem? I can tell you - from the experience of Miwatj Health - that the answer is a resounding no.
- So where does all this leave us? We have a situation in which the provision of health services by the NT Government to Yolngu people is little short of scandalous. We have a situation in which the Commonwealth Government bureaucracy simply has no idea what it is doing. And we have a situation in which the Commonwealth Government is trying to take away the rights of Yolngu to land, to stop the homelands movement, to remove the one

thing which evidence shows produces good health outcomes.

- Well, Yolngu will keep doing what they have done for decade after decade. They will fight. Whether or not they will win depends on who joins them in that fight. That is your decision to make.
- Thank you