

## Trust and meaningful conversations are key to improving First Nations preterm birth outcomes

Easily one of the proudest moments of my life was walking out of Hospital with my first born baby in my arms. I remember it so vividly. I'd had a smooth pregnancy and a great birth. My bouncing baby boy was three days old when we left the hospital. He was healthy and I genuinely left like the cat that got the cream as I walked the hospital corridors to my car.

There are few times in my life when I have felt that happy. Sadly, this is not the case for everyone. As an Obstetrician working in the Northern Territory, I see the devastating effects of babies born too early far too often.

Preterm birth is the definition given to babies born alive before 37 weeks of pregnancy are completed. It remains the single greatest cause of childhood death and disability in Australia.

Despite the broad improvements seen in reducing rates of early birth across the country through the Every Week Counts National Preterm Birth



**Dr Kiarna Brown**

Prevention Program, these positive outcomes have not as yet extended to First Nations women.

First Nations women living in pockets of the Top End experience some of the highest rates of preterm birth in the world, on par with disadvantaged groups in low-income countries.

Preterm birth remains the leading cause of death in children up to 5 years of age. In 2021,

there were almost twice as many preterm live babies born to First Nations mothers (14%) than to non-Aboriginal mothers (8%).

The complex interactions between maternal and perinatal health outcomes and the social determinants of health are key factors influencing the poorer health outcomes First Nations mothers and babies continue to experience.

We know that First Nations women have better birth outcomes when they have access to healthcare services and feel safe, respected, and have trusting relationships with their maternity care providers.

A recent study by the Menzies School of Health Research found the prevalence of many risk factors for preterm and early births were higher among First Nations women, compared to other expectant mothers.

Those risk factors included preterm membrane ruptures, diabetes in pregnancy, and blood pressure conditions. Importantly

within a preterm birth context, First Nations women are also more likely to have shorter cervical lengths which is a key risk factor for early birth. This is a critical area that requires our focus and additional research.

Access to appropriate healthcare services remains our biggest challenge. We also need to find ways to engage and educate women — and I'm not saying we should tell women what to do — but actually getting their perspectives on how health services can do better.

The development of our See, Stop, Scan campaign has been shaped by yarning groups in remote communities, exploring the community's awareness of preterm birth, hearing about their own experiences with maternity care and asking how health services can do better. It is hoped that it will provide a roadmap for improved outcomes for all First Nations women and their children.

We must strive to work with the non-Indigenous workforce to

ensure they are as culturally informed as possible, as Western medicine has long ignored how First Nations mothers had traditionally experienced pregnancy.

When women feel safe and respected, they're going to engage with services more often and they're going to have more meaningful relationships with their healthcare providers.

Then, and only then, will we be able to see meaningful and measurable improvements in Closing the Gap in preterm birth for our women, mothers, children and communities.

**Dr Kiarna Brown**  
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Top End Lead, Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance

(Dr Brown has written this Op Ed as part of National Close the Gap Day 2025 (Thursday, 20 March).

## Closing the Gap is a long-term commitment

In the six months since I became the federal Minister for Indigenous Australians, I have heard some inspiring stories of success.

I have met with men and women in Kununurra in WA's Kimberley region and in town camps outside Alice Springs who have told me about how proud they are to be working.

They are proud - of themselves and each other.

And they want to inspire others, including their children.

Some of them are in their first ever job. That's life changing.

Through our new remote jobs program they are embracing the dignity of work, with decent pay and conditions, and their communities are also seeing the economic benefits.

I've seen the impact of First Nations led maternity programs, including the South-East Queensland Birthing in Our Community and Djäkamirr Birthing on Country Project in Galiwin'ku in North East Arnhem Land.

I have met students in Western Sydney, inspired to engage with their culture and with school, through our Junior Rangers program.

I have heard the stories of young people turning their lives around and getting back to school or into work with support by frontline services like Nyoongar Outreach in WA.

I have met with women Indigenous



**Malarndirri McCarthy**

rangers in Healesville, Victoria who told me about their work in healing Country, and how healthy Country means healthy people.

I have seen the impact when First Nations people receive lifesaving care on Country, close to family, thanks to a new renal dialysis unit in the remote outback town of Coober Pedy.

All of these changes, and more, were made possible because of the persistence of First Nations people in advocating for a better way.

And our Government's willingness to work with First Nations people to deliver

better outcomes.

The Prime Minister recently tabled the Commonwealth's Closing the Gap 2024 Annual Report and 2025 Implementation Plan.

It gives a comprehensive overview of what our Government has delivered so far, and the work ahead.

Crucially, we are committed to doing this work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap was signed in 2020 under the former Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

It is a whole of government, cross-jurisdiction commitment that requires national leadership and partnership between all levels of governments and the Coalition of Peaks.

Closing the Gap must be above politics.

We're seeing this principle in action in our six-year partnership with the Northern Territory Government and Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory to deliver essential services for remote communities.

And in the landmark 10-year investment to significantly reduce overcrowding in remote Northern Territory communities and homelands.

200 houses have been built in the last 12 months, with a further 64 due for completion by mid-year.

In 2025 we're continuing our work to improve outcomes for First Nations people.

We're reducing the costs of 30

essential products in more than 76 remote stores to improve food security in remote communities.

We're also establishing a nutrition workforce, building on the work of the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation.

We're rolling out new laundries or upgrading facilities in 12 remote communities, because we know the connection between scabies and chronic diseases like Rheumatic Heart Disease.

As well as improving health outcomes, we're focused on economic empowerment for First Nations people.

We're strengthening the Indigenous Procurement Policy to boost opportunities for First Nations businesses to grow and create jobs.

And we're increasing opportunities for First Nations Australians to buy their own home and build intergenerational wealth through a boost to Indigenous Business Australia's Home Loan Capital Fund.

As I said in my Closing the Gap speech to parliament, our Government is ambitious for First Nations people.

We know there is much more to do to improve the lives of our most marginalised.

But change is happening.

There is no doubting Labor's commitment to improving the lives of First Nations people.

And there is no doubting Labor's commitment to Closing the Gap.

The Koori Mail welcomes your Letters to the Editor. Preference will be given to submissions of interest to Indigenous Australians. Please include your town and State of residence, and daytime telephone number for checking purposes. Items may be edited and reproduced.



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