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Senate report on social determinants deserves cross-party support

The Social Determinants of Health Alliance (SDOHA), representing more than 25 organisations calling for urgent action on the social determinants of health, has applauded last night's report from the Senate Community Affairs Committee on the social determinants, saying it represents a significant first step towards addressing the causes of health inequity in Australia – if all parties adopt the recommendations made by Labor, Liberal and Greens Senators.

“The establishment of the Senate Inquiry to investigate action on the social determinants was seen as the key that could unlock this debate, and if political parties follow their colleagues' lead, that expectation will prove to be true,” SDOHA spokesman Martin Laverty said. “There is good reason to be optimistic that the Senate committee's work will deliver real results for the people of Australia.”

SDOHA, representing health, social service and public policy organisations, said the fact the report's five recommendations are almost lifted from its submission means the Senate report has the strong backing of many of the key groups working to bring about health equity.

“Our top priority was to have the Commonwealth, and hopefully other governments, ratify the World Health Organisation report *Closing the gap in a generation*, and that's the committee's first recommendation,” Mr Laverty explained. “That will make governments accountable and also give them a roadmap for how to actually address the social determinants of health.”

Social Inclusion Minister Mark Butler spoke at last month's SDOHA launch about the 600,000 Australians living with complex, multi-layered disadvantage that was often caused by social factors. “We know that the surest path out of that is fixing those health problems and giving them decent education and training to find employment,” the Minister said.

Mr Laverty said the Senate committee's recommendation that governments particularly look at education, employment, housing, family and social security policy through a social determinants of health lens again has the potential to make a real difference.

“We know that the Senators recognise that all policies – transport, infrastructure environment and economic policy are a few other areas that could be added to the list – have an effect on people's health, so we hope politicians don't limit themselves to the specific, and pivotal, areas the committee mentioned.”

Mr Laverty pointed to the report by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling that last year outlined the financial benefits – in addition to the social advantages – that would be derived from government action on the determinants of health. Billions of dollars could be saved in health costs, including prescriptions, while billions more could be injected into the economy by helping Australians suffering from health conditions be made well and able to enter the workforce.

“At its core, addressing the social determinants of health is an issue of justice, of fairness, of equity; we're supposed to be the country of the 'fair go',” Mr Laverty said. “But addressing the social determinants also makes sense economically, and would allow governments to save money and generate additional revenue.”

“To the Alliance, this is a no-brainer. The multi-partisan Senate committee has offered a way forward. Let's hope partisan politics – and an election campaign – doesn't distract politicians from acting in Australians' best interests.”