



GE

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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RE: Australia's domestic response to the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health report "Closing the gap within a generation"

General Electric (GE) acknowledges the World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Determinants of Health report "*Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health*" and Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs examination of Australia's domestic response.

With regard to the Committee's terms of reference on the extent the Commonwealth is adopting and improving awareness of social determinations of health, GE focuses on the recognition of the inequity in access to potable water supplies in remote indigenous communities in Australia in the Closing the Gap initiative and recent reports to the Australian Government.

GE has supplied its electro dialysis-reversal technology to water treatment projects in remote indigenous communities, including Wiluna, Kiwirrkurra and Parnngurr in Western Australia.

Specifically, GE notes the Commission report states:

- access to clean water as "*basic human and societal.... [and] must be available universally regardless of the ability to pay*" (page 14);
- "*water-borne diseases are not caused by lack of antibiotics but by dirty water, and by the political, social, and economic forces that fail to make clean water available to all*" (page 35);

- that “[a]n estimated 1.2 billion people worldwide, almost of them in low- and middle-income countries, lack access to improved water supplies.... Ensuring people’s access to water and sanitation is essential to life, and a clear responsibility of the state” (page 155).

In terms of the recognition of access to potable water by the Australian Government, GE refers to the recommendation of Productivity Commission’s 2011 “Australia’s Urban Water Sector” review for State and Territory Governments to “undertake regular, public reviews of water and wastewater outcomes in indigenous communities... [and] assessed against the same metrics that are used to measure service quality in non-indigenous communities”.¹

All Australian governments have committed to a wide-ranging Closing the Gap program to reduce the “gap” in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The 2008 Closing the Gap National Indigenous Health Equality Summit Statement of Intent committed the Australian Government to achieving indigenous health equity by 2030 and providing necessary primarily health care and infrastructure to meet that goal by 2018.

GE notes the Closing the Gap initiative would be consistent with the Commission recommendations (page 204) that:

- Parliament and equivalent oversight bodies adopt a goal of improving health equity through action on the social determinants of health as a measure of government performance;
- National government establish a whole-of-government mechanism that is accountable to parliament, chaired at the highest political level; and
- The monitoring of social determinants and health equity impact assessment of all government policies, including finance, be used.

In his submission to Infrastructure Australia in October 2008, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mr Tom Calma recommended it prioritise infrastructure to provide “all indigenous households with potable water supplies and sanitation systems that enable healthy living”.²

In February 2010, the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce recommended to the Australian Government “as an urgent priority, governments should ensure that all communities in northern Australia have access to drinking water that meets appropriate water quality standards”.³ It noted “quality drinking is unevenly supplied across the north, with many indigenous communities and some regional towns not having access to potable water... [which] poses unacceptable risks to human health and well-being and should be addressed by all governments as an urgent priority”.⁴

¹ Productivity Commission, “Australia’s Urban Water Sector: Inquiry Report (Volume 1)”, page LIX

² Mr Tom Calma, “Submission to Infrastructure Australia”, October 2008, page 11

³ Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce, “Final Report”, March 2010, page 27

⁴ *ibid*, page 4

Similar to regional water and wastewater service, GE believes the upgrade of these services in indigenous communities satisfy the demonstrable public benefit test and should be eligible for government subsidies.

In April 2010, the Australian Government announced \$51.7 million for 18 projects in 17 indigenous communities to *“improve water supplies and wastewater services in remote communities around Australia to benefit more than 17,000 people”*.⁵

The inaugural meeting of the Northern Australian Ministerial Forum in December 2010 identified water as one five key themes, and report back to the Forum in June this year on the Australian Government’s response to the Northern Australia Land and Water Taskforce report and recommendations.⁶

The Government stated the funding supported objectives of the Council of Australian Government’s Strategy on Water and Wastewater Services in Remote (including Indigenous) Communities to *“provide sustainable, secure and safe water supplies and wastewater services; provide a level of service that meets the regulatory standards that would apply to any other community of similar size and location and encourage responsible use of water and, where appropriate, water conservation”*.⁷

GE believes the examination of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health report “Closing the gap within a generation”, the objectives of the Closing the Gap initiative and advice to the Australian Government on the importance of access to potable drinking water is an opportunity to consider what additional measures can be taken to improve water quality for remote indigenous communities.

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⁵ The Honourable Dr Mike Kelly AM, MP, *“\$51.7 million to improve water and wastewater services in 17 indigenous communities”*, April 23, 2010

⁶ Northern Australia Ministerial Forum, *“Joint Communique”*, December 13, 2010

⁷ Council of Australian Governments, *“Strategy on Water and Wastewater Services in Remote (including Indigenous Communities)”*, 2008