How can Australia do better for Indigenous health?

To the Editor: In his thought-provoking editorial in the May issue of the Journal,[1] Tait made reference to an apparent recent improvement in the life expectancies of Indigenous Australians by citing a 2010 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report entitled *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Oct 2010*.[2] In this report, the life expectancy for Indigenous Australians was quoted as 67.2 years for males and 72.9 years for females, compared with 78.7 and 82.6 years for non-Indigenous males and females, leaving a "gap" of 11.5 years and 9.7 years, respectively. These figures are from 2005–2007 (which includes the 2006 Census year), and are quoted again in this year's update report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.[3] At first glance, they appear to be a startling improvement on the figures from 1996–2001, which quote (as late as 2005) Indigenous life expectancies of 59.4 and 64.8 years for males and females respectively, representing a "gap" of about 17 years for both.[4]

Unfortunately, the apparent improvement represents not a miraculous leap forward in Indigenous health care and outcomes, but rather a change in the methodology used to calculate life expectancies around the time of the 2006 Census. The essence of the change was from an indirect to a direct demographic method of compiling life-expectancy estimates, which entailed correcting Indigenous death registration data before calculating death rates. The ABS anticipated the potential for confusion (not to mention premature celebration), and so included warnings that comparisons should not be made between published estimates of Indigenous life expectancies on their website and in subsequent reports, as well as producing a discussion paper outlining and justifying the changes.[5] The October 2010 ABS report explicitly stated that: "Differences should not be interpreted as measuring changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life expectancy over time".[2]

As with any statistical analysis, the underlying issue is the quality of the data. As we continue to work to narrow the "true" Indigenous life-expectancy gap, we need to be mindful of the importance of accurate record-keeping, including the identification of Indigenous status, if future analysis of mortality statistics is to stand up to scrutiny.

Lachlan J McIver Senior Medical Officer

Thursday Island Hospital, Thursday Island, QLD.

lachlan.mciver@gmail.com

Competing interests: No relevant disclosures.

doi: 10.5694/mja11.10683

1 Tait PW. How can Australia do better for Indigenous health? *Med J Aust* 2011; 194: 501-502.
2 Australian Bureau of Statistics. The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Oct 2010. Canberra: ABS, 2010. (ABS Cat. No. 4704.0.)
3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, an overview 2011. Canberra: AIHW, 2011. (AIHW Cat. No. IHW 42.)
4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 2005. Canberra: AIHW, 2005. (AIHW Cat. No. IHW 14.)
5 Australian Bureau of Statistics. Discussion paper: assessment of methods for developing life tables for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006. Canberra: ABS, 2008. (ABS Cat. No. 3302.0.55.002.) ❑