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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Interim Co-Design Report led by Professors Marcia Langton and Tom Calma, on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nation Voice proposal.

The Doctors Reform Society has been involved in health policy development for over forty years, This work has included advocacy for Aboriginal health and an emphasis on addressing all causes of poor health outcomes for all people irrespective of income, socioeconomic status, race, culture, and geographical location..

We note that the main focus of this co-design task was to develop proposals for an *Indigenous voice to government*. As such, the report clearly outlines a range of options and models to enable First Nations peoples to advise all levels of government on significant matters that affect their wellbeing and how these can be addressed.

The actual design of the Voice is best determined by Indigenous people themselves as they are best placed to develop processes that best represent the diversity of Indigenous communities.

Our submission focuses on the importance of this process in closing the gap in health disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Whilst Aboriginal community-controlled health services have made an enormous contribution to improving Aboriginal health and in alleviating the suffering of individuals and families with health issues, the foundations of good health go far beyond the scope of clinical service, both curative and preventative. Research into the social determinants of health has identified a long list of critical factors that determine the health of populations – culture, housing, water and waste disposal, education (including adult literacy), employment, etc.

Underlying these well-documented determinants, international research has identified what has been termed the ‘Control Factor’ in determining health outcomes. The classic ‘Whitehall Studies’ led by Professor Michael Marmott in the United Kingdom demonstrated that, after taking account all known risk factors for a range of causes of death, there remained a significant influence only explained by where individuals sat in the British Civil Service hierarchy. In other words, this was about degree of control people have over their lives. Over ten years ago, Marmott applied his findings to the situation of Indigenous Australians, arguing for “the importance of creating the conditions that enable people to take control of their lives.”<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, there has been increasing awareness of transgenerational trauma prevalent in Aboriginal communities.

While some have cast Constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples as merely symbolic, we

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Marmot, Social determinants and the health of Indigenous Australians MJA 2011; 194 (10): 512-513.  
[http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/194\\_10\\_160511/mar10460\\_fm.html](http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/194_10_160511/mar10460_fm.html)

point out that such acknowledgement has an impact on people's identity, and confidence. This, coupled with a structural means of influencing policy and programs in their communities and a truth telling process will go a long way in overcoming intergenerational trauma which underlies much of the ill health of people.

We note that over the past 40 years or so various Aboriginal consultative bodies have been established by government, only to be shut down by government when it has suited them. The latest example is ATSIC.

For many years programs have been established to address various aspects of community life, only to be defunded after a few years regardless of their effectiveness.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart provides an historic opportunity to provide Indigenous Australians with the opportunity to provide guidance and leadership to the Parliament about what is needed and how interventions can be delivered. There are real challenges in this as Aboriginal Australia is not an homogenous population but is vastly diverse. Thus, one size does not fit all, and to be effective local communities must have the opportunity to determine appropriate strategies and deliveries. Governments at all levels have failed to navigate these realities.

Thus, it is crucial that The Voice be enshrined in the Constitution so that governments are obliged to implement the structures necessary for The Voice.

Based on the above we propose that:

1. Following a decision about the most suitable, representative model for an Indigenous Voice and before it is legislated, the government honour its election commitment to hold a Referendum on the *constitutional enshrinement* of an Indigenous Voice.
2. The Referendum design and information campaign be by bi-partisan committee led by First Nations representatives, ensuring that the Australian people have access to clear and comprehensive information about the Indigenous Voice.
3. Enabling legislation for the Voice must be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament
4. The membership model for the National Voice must ensure previously unheard Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures