

MEDIA RELEASE - MAY 11, 2015

Leading health experts gather to take aim at Rheumatic Heart Disease affecting Australian youth

Experts are coming together in Sydney to address the large burden of acute rheumatic fever (ARF) and rheumatic heart disease (RHD) in the Australian landscape.

Both **preventable** conditions, usually found only in less developed countries, ARF and RHD are hitting Indigenous communities in Australia hard due largely to the social disadvantages encountered there. In the Northern Territory in 2010, the prevalence rate of RHD among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was **26 times the rate for non-Indigenous people**.

Facts about ARF and RHD

- ARF is an illness caused by an autoimmune response to a bacterial infection commonly called the strep bacterium.
- ARF affects the heart and joints and sometimes the brain. Hospitalisation is required for ARF.
- Damage to the heart valves may remain or even progress once the ARF has resolved. This damage is known as RHD.
- **RHD is a permanent, chronic, and sometimes fatal disease.**

How RHD affects Australians

- **ARF and RHD prevalence in remote Indigenous communities of Northern and Central Australia is among the highest reported in the world.**
- Between 2007 and 2009, **897 deaths were attributed to RHD.**
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people** are up to **eight times more likely** than other Australians to be hospitalised for ARF and RHD, and **nearly 20 times as likely to die from the disease.**
- Young people aged **5 – 15 years are at highest risk** of a first episode of ARF. 58% of cases in the Northern Territory between 2005-2010 were in children aged 5-14. The established heart valve damage of RHD is most common in adolescents and young adults.

Delegates from the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and New South Wales are meeting for five days of information sharing and planning at Sydney University from May 11-15. The week is being organised by RHD Australia, the National Coordination Unit for the Government's acute rheumatic fever strategy, which is based at Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin. RHD Australia works collaboratively with the RHD Control Programs across Australian jurisdictions to educate and raise awareness of ARF and RHD with health professionals and communities and to collect and analyse burden of disease data.

During the events in Sydney, "we will have experts from all jurisdictions bringing their own understanding of the challenges involved in preventing ARF and treating RHD," said Professor Bart Currie, Director, RHD Australia.

"New opportunities, new knowledge and new technology make us optimistic that we can make a real difference. The vision is that by working collaboratively we can eliminate what is an entirely preventable condition," said Professor Currie.

In late 2014, the National Health and Medical Council of Australia awarded five years of funding for a Centre for Research Excellence in RHD. Known as the '**END RHD CRE**', the program brings together 20 investigators, 16 institutions and a broad range of collaborators to identify the steps and interim targets needed to end RHD in Australia.

MORE

"Funding for the END RHD CRE will make it possible to amplify world class RHD research already underway in Australia and to understand what is needed to eliminate the disease as a public health priority in this country," said Professor Jonathan Carapetis, Director of Telethon Kids Institute, Chief Investigator CRE.

"By bringing together all of the key agencies and experts working across the country on this problem, we can scrutinise all aspects of the issue and map out new ways of preventing ARF and ending RHD. We feel we have the necessary aspects in line to fully address the issues facing Australia."

The END RHD CRE will function as a virtual centre, providing the chance for individuals and institutions throughout Australia to contribute to research efforts around the disease.

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The following experts are available for interview

- Professor Jonathan Carapetis, Director Telethon Kids Institute, Chief Investigator END RHD CRE
- Professor Bart Currie, Director RHD Australia
- Claire Boardman, Deputy Director RHD Australia
- Vicki Wade, Leader of Aboriginal Health Unit, Heart Foundation

For further information or to arrange an interview please contact:
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