

New e-learning tool launched to prevent rheumatic heart disease

A new educational tool that aims to improve clinical understanding of acute rheumatic fever (ARF) and rheumatic heart disease (RHD) across Australia has been trialled and launched.

The tool, available online from www.rhdaustralia.org.au, is a series of five online interactive modules that will provide the health workforce with an introductory-level understanding of best practice approaches to the prevention, diagnosis and management of ARF and RHD.

ARF is a significant cause of disease among Indigenous children, often leading to RHD, a chronic heart condition in which the heart valves are damaged, which can lead to heart failure, stroke and premature death.

Australia has among the highest recorded rates of RHD despite the disease being almost eradicated in most developed countries.

The modules developed by RHD Australia, an initiative of the Menzies School of Health Research uses interactive elements such as avatars (animated characters), case studies and online tests to engage users.

“We created an avatar of a remote area nurse, a GP, an Indigenous health worker, an auntie of a child with acute rheumatic fever and a young boy diagnosed with acute rheumatic fever to tell the story from different perspectives,” says Dale Thompson, Senior Manager of RHD Australia.

“Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders bear the brunt of this disease in Australia and these modules are particularly important for improving the quality of healthcare provided to these communities.”

Medical Coordinator at the Rural Clinical School of Western Australia Assoc/Prof Murali Narayanan said the module will assist with better informing medical students about the issues faced by rural and remote practice, including ARF and RHD.

“The medical students found the modules easy to navigate and liked the option of learning at their own pace,” Assoc/Prof Murali Narayanan says.

“It was timely for students to hone their skills on rheumatic fever as they had to interact with children diagnosed with this condition in the course of their paediatric assignments.”

Dale Thompson says the tool is for people with little or no knowledge about acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease, and it can also be used as a revision tool for those with knowledge of acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease.

“Feedback so far has been positive and we will be rolling out the modules to make them available on various platforms,” Thompson says.

“An excerpt of the modules was also recently showcased at an international conference in Dubai with interest from international countries looking to adapt the modules to local needs.”

Health organisations interested in implementing the package on their learning management systems should contact info@rhdaustralia.org.au. Practitioners may be able to claim Continuing Professional Development hours.

Background

RHD is caused by one or more episodes ARF. These repeated episodes leave the heart valves damaged so that they can no longer function adequately, leading to heart failure and sometimes the need for cardiac surgery or death.

ARF is caused by the body's autoimmune response to an infection by the Group A *streptococcus* germ, and is commonly seen in children from Indigenous communities across northern Australia. ARF occurs mainly in children aged between 5 and 15, and affects a number of areas of the body, including the joints, brain, skin and heart.

RHDAustralia

RHDAustralia is Australia's national rheumatic heart disease coordination unit and aims to reduce death and disability from acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing RHDAustralia is an initiative of Menzies School of Health Research in partnership with Baker IDI and James Cook University the unit was established in 2009 as part of the National Rheumatic Fever Strategy.

Menzies School of Health Research is the national leader in Indigenous and tropical health. The independent medical research institute aims to improve and advance health; to break the cycle of disease and to reduce the health inequities in Australia and the Asia Pacific region, particularly for disadvantaged populations. Menzies sets its sights on fostering excellence and leadership in scientific research and education. The organisation has more than 380 staff working in over 60 communities in Central and Northern Australia, as well as the Asia Pacific region.

Media contact:

Victoria Close

RHDAustralia, Marketing and Communications

t: (08) 8943 5085

m: 0421 469 817