

23 August 2016

Call to prevent hearing loss and improve school readiness in young children

In recognition of *Hearing Awareness Week* (August 21-27), leading ear health experts at Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) are calling for more investment in the prevention and treatment of ear disease and hearing loss in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Menzies Professor Amanda Leach says the failure to recognise the damage of prior or current ear disease and hearing loss imposes further disadvantage to Indigenous children that might already be struggling in the education and juvenile detention systems.

“Indigenous children have the highest rates of otitis media – commonly known as middle ear infection – and burst eardrums in the world,” Prof Leach explained.

In remote communities, otitis media and significant hearing loss establishes in almost all babies within weeks of birth. Research has revealed these ear infections are not as painful for Indigenous children compared to non-Indigenous children, so the disease progresses undetected and often results in perforated ear drums.

“Hearing loss impacts on the development of speech and language and is linked to educational disadvantage, communication and behavioural problems,” Prof Leach said.

“Indigenous children almost always have bilateral hearing loss which impacts on auditory processing difficulties, lead to social isolation, disengagement with the education system, their community and their peers.”

Prof Leach said *Hearing Awareness Week* provides an opportunity to help Australians understand the difficulties Indigenous children with ear disease and hearing loss face and how hearing loss impacts everything from education outcomes, to employment opportunities, to living standards and personal safety.

A National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) funded Centre of Research Excellence in Ear and Hearing Health of Indigenous children (CRE_ICHEAR), led by Prof Leach, is dedicated to improving ear and hearing health among Indigenous children and ending the disadvantage associated with hearing loss.

“Indigenous leaders, researchers and other experts in our CRE_ICHEAR have worked hard to find out what works and what needs to be done in addressing potential prevention and treatment strategies, but more is needed. What we really need is a whole of government approach”, Prof Leach said.

“The health sector needs to invest in clinical training; clinicians need to understand the aetiology and appropriate use of antibiotics when treating ear disease; and the education system needs to allocate resources to training teachers in effective strategies for engaging and teaching children who have hearing loss.”

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Menzies School of Health Research

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