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## Call to arms to save children from rheumatic heart disease

A leading paediatric cardiologist has emphasised the need to prevent rheumatic heart disease (RHD) in Indigenous children to avoid premature death, cardiac surgery and stroke to allow them to live a fulfilling life.

Dr Bo Remenyi spoke at the *RHD Australia Conference 2013: Practice and Culture* in Darwin yesterday about cases of Indigenous children who have required multiple heart surgery because of permanent damage to their heart valves caused by acute rheumatic fever (ARF).

Caused by common throat or skin infections, ARF leaves permanent damage to the heart valves, resulting in life threatening RHD. Once a person has had ARF, there is a high chance they will get it again unless they have preventative penicillin injections every 28 days.

Dr Remenyi relayed the case of a three-year-old boy diagnosed with ARF, who required his first cardiac surgery at the age of eight.

“The boy had his second heart operation when he was nine, and a third when he was 15 years old for a double heart valve replacement,” Dr Remenyi said.

“The sad thing is that we could have treated this boy before his heart valves were damaged and prevented the need for heart surgery if he had received 100 per cent of his penicillin injections.

“This boy now has a 50 per cent chance of suffering a stroke or dying before he reaches 30 years of age.”

Dr Remenyi went on to explain that the boy is now required to take blood-thinning medication daily to avoid a stroke, as well as have painful penicillin injections every 28 days to avoid a further recurrence of ARF.

“We have a big task ahead, but there has been a lot of enthusiasm at the RHD Australia Conference.”

Data collection shows a nine per cent reduction per year in the Northern Territory for ARF recurrence rates, which is a small but important step towards reducing the burden of RHD.

“Health workers can ensure that people diagnosed with ARF have a good chance of survival if they receive 100 per cent of their penicillin injections,” Dr Remenyi said.

The Menzies School of Health Research, in partnership with Indigenous communities, is currently developing innovative ways of optimising adherence to penicillin injections.

### Media

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### Background information:

RHD Australia 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 RHD Australia is an initiative of Menzies School of Health Research. The unit was established in 2009 as part of the National Rheumatic Fever Strategy.