MEDIA RELEASE

Seminar to reduce world's highest rate of rheumatic heart disease in children

RHDAustralia will host a free seminar in Cairns tonight as part of Australia's *Rheumatic Fever Strategy* to reduce the world's highest recorded rate of acute rheumatic fever.

The seminar will highlight the necessity to see a doctor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially children, with a sore throat, skin sores or swollen joints. The presence of these symptoms could indicate rheumatic fever which left untreated could lead to lifelong rheumatic heart disease.

RHDAustralia Deputy Director Claire Boardman said the seminar will aim to improve diagnoses of acute rheumatic fever, most common in five to 14 year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Ms Boardman said, 'A key theme of the seminar will be how important early detection of acute rheumatic fever is, as left untreated can lead to further episodes, cardiac damage and premature death'.

Ms Boardman said, 'We hope this seminar will provide valuable information resulting in better diagnosis and management of acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease by healthcare providers to prevent this potentially fatal disease'.

People with a history of acute rheumatic fever are treated with regular antibiotics to prevent further episodes, and to prevent rheumatic heart disease. However, many health workers are unaware it still exists given the disease is mostly eradicated in urban regions of Australia.

Australia has the highest recorded rate of rheumatic heart disease in the world. The incidence of acute rheumatic fever in children from North Queensland between 2004 and 2009 ranged between 156 to 319 per 100,000.

The seminar's keynote speaker, rheumatic heart disease expert and Paediatric Cardiologist Dr Bo Remenyi, will share her knowledge from her work in remote Indigenous communities.

The seminar will include the following presentations:

- The Australian Rheumatic Fever Strategy – Claire Boardman, Deputy Director RHDAustralia
- Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease in Queensland – Mellise Anderson, Program Manager Queensland RHD Register & Control Program
- Rheumatic heart disease in pregnancy – Geri Vaughan, National Coordinator Australasian Maternity Outcomes Surveillance System (AMOSS)
- Getting it right: clinical diagnostic challenges – Dr Malcolm McDonald, Physician Apunipima, Wu Chopperen, James Cook University
- Echocardiographic changes – Dr Ben Reeves, Paediatric Cardiologist, Cairns

- Aspects of the Disease and Secondary Prevention Management -Dr Andrew White, Director of Paediatrics, Townsville
- Cardiac Surgery: The Patients' Journey - Dr Bo Remenyi, Paediatric Cardiologist, Darwin

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Media are welcome to attend the seminar. Please see RHDAustralia Project Officer Sally Wright on arrival.

Event details
RHDAustralia Seminar, 5.30pm Thursday 24 July, Cairns Hospital Auditorium, 165 The Esplanade, Cairns

Background information
RHD is caused by one or more episodes of acute rheumatic fever. These repeated episodes damage heart valves so they no longer function adequately, leading to heart failure and sometimes the need for cardiac surgery, or death. Acute rheumatic fever 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. Acute rheumatic fever 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.

About RHDAustralia
RHDAustralia is the National Coordination Unit for rheumatic heart disease and aims to reduce death and disability from acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health, RHDAustralia is an initiative of Menzies School of Health Research. The unit was established in 2009 as part of the National Rheumatic Fever Strategy.