

NT:Researcher tackles NT respiratory disease

By Neda Vanovac

DARWIN, Nov 19 AAP - A health researcher who is tackling some of the world's highest rates of respiratory disease in indigenous children in the Northern Territory has won a \$25,000 national grant to further her fight.

Dr Gabrielle McCallum from the Menzies School of Health Research is examining how to prevent and treat recurring lung infections and lung damage early in Aboriginal children.

Her Australia-first research focuses on contributing factors such as overcrowding and socio-economic impacts in disadvantaged communities, and how to improve clinical care.

"Indigenous children unfortunately have among the highest rates of respiratory disease in the world," Dr McCallum said.

Children aged under two have a less-developed immune system, and those who have repeated chest infections are likely to develop the chronic condition, which can kill them in their 30s or 40s.

Part of her research involves educating parents about the dangers of a wet cough.

"It's become normalised," she said.

"So when you're doing an examination of a child and you're hearing this wet suppressed cough, you talk to the mum and say 'your child's got a cough', and she says, 'everyone's got that cough'.

"We're trying to encourage people to develop an awareness of the cough because that's where most of the damage is happening, in the airway with this persistent bacterial infection that is causing damage to the breathing tubes."

Most children recover from chest infections on their own, but one in five indigenous children were back in hospital within 13 months, having progressed from an acute infection to chronic disease.

"We have the opportunity to make a big difference, because lungs keep growing until children are about eight," Dr McCallum said.

It's not known if the condition is reversible.

Dr McCallum has won the Bupa Health Foundation 2015 Emerging Health Researcher award and will receive \$25,000 to further her research.

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