



14 Dec 2015

Northern Territory News, Darwin

Author: Hayley Sorensen • Section: General News • Article type : News Item
Audience : 15,054 • Page: 6 • Printed Size: 225.00cm² • Market: NT • Country: Australia
Words: 290 • Item ID: 511616949



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Page 1 of 1

Trial results hold hope for scabies prevention

HAYLEY SORENSEN

A NEW trial that reduced scabies outbreaks by 94 per cent in one year could hold the key to its prevention in indigenous communities in the Territory.

The Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the University of NSW's Kirby Institute conducted the trial in Fiji.

It showed mass administration of oral ivermectin tablets reduced the prevalence of the infectious skin disease by 94 per cent after one year.

Menzies School of Health Research and Royal Darwin Hospital infectious diseases head, Professor Bart Currie, said the findings held promise for the Territory.

Up to 40 per cent of people living in remote communities can be infected by the disease.

Seven out of 10 indigenous children contract the skin dis-

ease in their first year of life.

Scabies is caused by a microscopic mite that forms an itchy pimple-like rash.

Prof Currie said scabies could have far more serious implications than terrible itching.

He said secondary bacterial complications from scabies could lead to kidney conditions, rheumatic heart disease and blood poisoning.

"All of those are relatively uncommon, but when you have so many people infected, you only need one in 100 to develop one of these things for it to be a problem," he said.

Prof Currie said the method used in the study should be applied to remote Australian communities.

"This is something that we should be considering for the next few years in Central Australia," he said.

The effectiveness of scabies

treatments in Australia is diminished by reinfection between communities.

Prof Currie said if all communities were treated concurrently, infection rates were likely to plummet.

He highlighted the fact that the long-term success of such a program would also require "ongoing attention to the overcrowding and housing issues in remote communities".