

MEDIA RELEASE

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Bold bid to end Rheumatic Heart Disease

Some of the nation's leading medical researchers will converge on Darwin next week to step out a plan to wipe out rheumatic heart disease – a life-threatening condition that disproportionately affects Indigenous Australians.

The meeting, organised by the END RHD Centre of Research Excellence (END RHD CRE), will develop a strategy to systematically eliminate rheumatic heart disease.

The collaboration includes chief investigators from the Telethon Kids Institute, Menzie's School of Health Research, The University of Western Australia, The South Australian Health & Medical Research Institute, Baker IDI Heart & Diabetes Institute and Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

Professor Jonathan Carapetis, Head of the END RHD CRE and Director of the Telethon Kids Institute in Perth, said the rates of rheumatic heart disease in Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were among the highest in the world.

"Rheumatic heart disease is an entirely preventable, yet devastating condition," said Professor Carapetis. "This is a disease usually seen only in developing countries and should no longer exist in Australia. It is caused by a bacterial infection of the throat and skin, which, without treatment with antibiotics, can result in heart failure and other complications including stroke.

"One in 43 Indigenous people living in remote and rural areas have rheumatic heart disease. This country has the largest disparity in cardiovascular disease outcomes between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in the world and it is simply unacceptable."

Professor Carapetis said outcomes from the END RHD CRE meeting will include strategies to prevent and treat infections that lead to the disease, such as treatment options via long-acting penicillin and developing a vaccine against the bacterial cause of the infection, group A streptococcus.

Ms Heather D'Antoine, Associate Director for Aboriginal Programs at Menzie's School of Health Research, said the END RHD CRE meeting is a valuable opportunity to discuss life-saving initiatives that can't come soon enough.

"There are currently over 2600 cases of rheumatic heart disease in the Northern Territory, and young Indigenous Australians in the Territory are up to 122 times more likely to have rheumatic heart disease than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

“The impact on our community is devastating; children must travel for heart surgery; young adults live with premature disability; and pregnant women face high-risk pregnancies.

“To prevent further infections, people being treated for rheumatic heart disease must endure a painful penicillin injection every 28 days for a minimum of ten years and, on average, young people aged 15 – 24 only adhere to 50 per cent of their required injections, leaving them at serious risk of chronic heart damage,” said Ms D'Antoine.

The END RHD CRE is committed to identifying costed, stepwise, evidence-based interventions that will be presented to the Australian Government as part of the National Endgame Strategy.

“This strategy and its recommended actions will require investment and support from government policy-makers, allowing the work of these great minds to be put into action and ending rheumatic heart disease in Australia once and for all,” concluded Ms D'Antoine.

The END RHD CRE annual meeting will take place at the Menzies School of Health Research on Thursday 11 May.

For more information about the END RHD CRE or to view the prospectus, visit www.rhdaustralia.org.au/end-rhd-cre

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