

# Silent issue hurting kids

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Health Reporter

## The nation's leading ear experts descend on Top End

NINE in 10 indigenous kids in remote communities have a chronic ear infection which researchers fear is limiting their educational opportunities.

Charles Darwin University chancellor Neil Balnaves said an infection called otitis media was one of the biggest health issues currently affecting indigenous Australians.

"Ninety per cent of indigen-

ous children that are not in major cities suffer from it," Mr Balnaves said.

"More than half of them will grow up as adults with real deafness problems.

"We have an epidemic on our hands. How the heck can these kids learn? How the heck can these kids get direction?"

Mr Balnaves said children with otitis media were at a dis-

advantage before school started – a disadvantage which continued into adulthood.

"The reason behind a lot of the incarceration of older indigenous kids is a lot to do with the fact they haven't been able to be educated," he said.

"Any kid that can't function, he's going to muck up."

This week, the nation's leading ear health experts are

in Darwin for the 5th Otitis Media Australia Conference, hoping to find the answers to Australia's hearing problems.

The NT News understands that at midday today, the NT Government will make a major funding commitment to help prevent and treat otitis media.

Menzies ear health research program leader Professor Amanda Leach, who will speak

at the conference today, said hearing problems could have a lifelong impact.

Prof Leach said the infection was mostly caused by bacteria, which was often transmitted from young children to small babies.

She said social determinants, such as overcrowding, exacerbated the issue in remote Australian communities.

"It's preventable if we didn't have the overcrowding and cross infection issues," she said.

"It's important for the Territory because, sadly, we do have the highest presence of otitis media and the most severe cases of otitis media.

"It's a chronic condition, and the cumulative effect is that it reduces and limits kids readiness for school and life after school, but it is a treatable condition."

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## Making noise for kids' sake

**IF KIDS can't hear properly, how can they be expected to learn properly?**

That's the question researchers have been asking for decades. Nine out of 10 indigenous kids in Australia who live in remote areas have an ear infection called otitis media. Often, the infection is missed by health professionals, who visit communities on a fly-in, fly-out basis, and aren't able to monitor the hearing of young Aussies.

Severe otitis media can result in permanent hearing loss. Undiagnosed, the infection gets worse, which means a lot of indigenous kids starting school are already behind.

Long-term otitis media can lead to hearing impairments which can impact the way a child speaks, the way they learn languages, and can contribute to behavioural problems.

According to the Australian Health Department, the infection can affect a child's social, emotional and educational development. After all, if kids can't hear in class, why would they listen? If they can't understand their teacher, how can they engage?

This starts a slippery slope. Kids act up, not wanting to draw attention to the fact they can't follow lessons. Ear problems are widening the gap between indigenous kids in remote areas and non-indigenous kids in urban areas.

We need to help our kids hear, to give them the best chance at life. Today, Australia's leading ear health investigators are gathering at the 5th Otitis Media Australia Conference in Darwin. The NT News understands a major funding project will be announced to help fight this infection. We give this initiative our full support. We hear you.