

Tiwi ears in Tiwi hands

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Newly graduated ear health facilitators will provide local knowledge and expertise when checking the ears and hearing of children in their community.

Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) celebrated the first graduates of its Hearing for Learning Initiative who have gained Certificate II training in Aboriginal Primary Health Care, and enhanced skills in detecting ear and hearing problems this month.

Graduates will have the opportunity to transition to employment in clinics as ear health facilitators, working with health professionals, families and the schools to help kids who need treatment for their ears and who might not be hearing well.

The community-based training initiative focuses on prevention through early detection of ear issues in young children by a locally trained workforce. Seven trainees completed the six-week course at Wurrumiyanga on the Tiwi Islands.

Graduate Aileen Tiparui said she was inspired to do the training in order to help the young people in her community to take care of their hearing.

"I wanted to learn more about hearing and to get more skills and to know more about hearing problems for our kids, especially the young ones," Ms Tiparui said.

"I learned new skills and how to look after ears, such as how to use an otoscope to look into ears."

Up to nine in every ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under the age of three in the Northern Territory (NT), suffer from some type of otitis media, either "glue ear", "bulging ear drums" or "runny ears" in one or both ears. If left untreated this can have a devastating impact on a child's entire life trajectory.

Menzies' Professor Amanda Leach, joint chair of the Initiative, said that the program aimed to increase early detection of otitis media, by training local community members to become ear experts that support on the ground health and education services.

"This will decrease the need for fly-in fly-out specialists, reduce the treatment waiting period and create employment opportunities for up to 40 community-based workers in the NT," Prof Leach said.

"It is important, now more than ever given the COVID-19 pandemic, to have local health practitioners who can provide essential services to their community. These new graduates will be able to work with their community to help identify ear health concerns and treatments early, to reduce the risk of long-term ear disease and associated hearing loss."

The Initiative is a stepped-wedge trial that will deliver, fund and evaluate on-country training and employment in 20 communities around the NT over the next three years. It is funded by lead philanthropic supporter The Balnaves Foundation, and the Australian and NT governments.

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Note for journalists: The Certificate II training in Aboriginal Primary Health Care was provided through Central Australian Remote Health Development Services (CARHDS).

Photo caption: Graduate Aileen Tiparui uses her new skills to check the ear health of John Tiparui and Robertson Munkara.

Photo credit: Menzies School of Health Research

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies School of Health Research is one of Australia's leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving Indigenous, global and tropical health. Menzies has a history of over 35 years of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, joining with partners across the Asia-Pacific as well as Indigenous communities across northern and central Australia. Menzies collaborates to create new knowledge, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.