

MEDIA RELEASE

Strengthening health systems in Timor-Leste

13 September 2021

Today, marks two years since Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) officially established an office in Timor-Leste.

Menzies is working with the Timor-Leste Government and partners to strengthen health systems for responding to infectious diseases challenges.

Menzies projects in Timor-Leste are designed to build capacity in clinical, surveillance and laboratory settings, emphasising the importance of the health system working together to improve response to infectious diseases at both the individual patient and the public health level.

Through a range of different projects, research has been used as a tool to understand epidemiology of disease and investigate the potential impact of changes to the health system.

With the support of the Fleming Fund country grant, Menzies has adapted their work to include a One Health approach, supporting human health and animal health work to address the challenge of antimicrobial resistance in Timor-Leste.

Dr Josh Francis says, "Bacteria that are resistant to the antibiotics we normally used to treat infections exist in Timor-Leste. They are there in the environment, and they affect animals and humans. Using a One Health approach, the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries are working to understand the real situation of antimicrobial resistance in Timor-Leste and respond to it in a way that ensures that Timorese people can get access to the right treatment for serious infections."

Since 2020, the work of the STRONG TL project has expanded significantly to include major support for the response to COVID-19 in Timor-Leste, including training and technical assistance to ensure that testing for COVID-19 could happen in Timor-Leste, safely, credibly, and efficiently.

Total number of COVID-19 PCR tests conducted in Timor-Leste until end of August 2021 is 186,307 samples.

Executive director of Timor-Leste's National Health Laboratory, Endang Soares da Silva, said the partnership between NHL and Menzies has helped NHL to enhance its ability to conduct diagnostic microbiology tests, clinical diagnostics and surveillance for various infectious diseases.

"With the support of Menzies, NHL has made great progress that is highlighted through our technical staff," said Ms Soares da Silva.

"Every technician that has been involved in the training, has really increased their capacity, their knowledge and work experience in microbiology, their confidence to report the results linked to diagnostics, surveillance and research."

Working with the NHL and the MOH as well as the Australian National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, Menzies is also implementing projects looking at the epidemiology of

COVID-19 and other vaccine-preventable diseases by conducting serological surveillance in Timor-Leste.

Dr. Nelson Martins says “Seroprevalence study is very important to understand the real individual immunity for vaccine preventable diseases and from a preventable endemic disease to help MOH, development partners and community develop more accurate and evidence-based intervention. ARIA-RISE projects arrived in the right time, when the seroprevalence study for COVID-19 immunity is highly needed to guide everyday decision on tackling highly evolving mutation of SARCOV-19 and with its variants. Despite, TL report reveal good coverage of vaccine administration, the real immunity developed from vaccines are yet to be reported.”

Menzies most recent project, MATCH TL, will help to strengthen diagnosis and surveillance of important infectious diseases including malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV in Timor-Leste.

Menzies continues to work closely with Timor-Leste Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Instituto Nacional de Saúde to provide technical support in strengthening health systems in Timor-Leste.

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies is one of Australia’s leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and a leader in global and tropical research into life-threatening illnesses, Menzies continues to translate research into effective partnerships and programs in communities across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

