

Training remote health workers to diagnose rheumatic heart disease

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A new study to improve access to culturally safe, best quality care for Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) in high-burden Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is underway after a Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) Cardiovascular Health Mission Grant application was successful, securing \$999,764 for the three-year project.

The research addresses an urgent need to enhance and accelerate diagnosis of RHD outside acute health settings and improve outcomes.

The study will be conducted in partnership with community leaders and local partners, and the implementation strategy will be developed in partnership with communities, using principles of co-design, community participation and capacity building for local healthcare staff.

RHD disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contributing to long-term cardiovascular morbidity in children and adults.

Females are more commonly affected than males, and RHD is the leading indirect cause of maternal morbidity and mortality within at-risk populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Clinical presentations with RHD are frequently late in the disease progression, and opportunities for prevention or early treatment are often missed.

In some NT communities, the prevalence of RHD is as high as 5 per cent among school aged children.

Menzies Associate Professor Joshua Francis said the Non-Expert Acquisition and Remote Expert Review of Screening echocardiography images from Child health and AnteNatal clinics (NEARER SCAN) study, aims to evaluate the implementation of a diagnostic approach to screening for RHD in children and pregnant women.

“By incorporating novel technology such as handheld echocardiography, performed by local healthcare staff with an offsite image review into routine health service provision, and embedding them in health practice, we can improve diagnosis of RHD and help people achieve better health outcomes,” A/Prof Francis said.

Rheumatic heart disease is also a significant problem in Timor-Leste.

“With our work based in the NT and in Timor-Leste, this disease is very familiar. All too often in Timor-Leste, we see children present with severe rheumatic heart disease, when they already have heart failure, and sadly, many children in Timor-Leste, die because of rheumatic heart disease. Improved strategies for early detection and access to treatment are essential,” A/Prof Francis said.

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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.