

Examining the effects of extreme heat on health service delivery in remote Australia

11 October 2022

A two-year project examining the impact of extreme temperature on the delivery of primary healthcare services in remote Central Australia is now underway, after the project was awarded \$480,000 from the Commonwealth's Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF).

The MRFF Indigenous Health Research Grant will support Indigenous-led research to better inform the development of strategies to combat the effects of extreme heat.

Remote communities are serviced by Primary Health Care (PHC) clinics generally run by resident nurses and Aboriginal Health Practitioners who are the first point of contact when a remote resident is affected by extreme heat exposure.

Anecdotally, the majority of cases involve patients who are likely treated at their local clinic, before being sent home to rest. A minority of patients will require a medical consultation and possibly medical retrieval to Alice Springs or Tennant Creek Hospital.

Menzies Professor of Remote and Rural Health Services Research Professor John Wakerman said little is actually known about the impact of extreme temperatures on health care-seeking behaviour at the first point of contact in remote communities.

"We know that early intervention is the best approach to minimise the health effects of extreme temperature, but we know very little about the impact of extreme temperature on Primary Health Care service utilisation in remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia. This project will help address this gap in knowledge," Prof Wakerman said.

Hot weather often termed as a 'silent killer' has killed more Australians than all other extreme weather events combined, including bushfires, floods and cyclones.

Alice Springs currently experiences more than 100 days per year with temperatures greater than 35°C. Climate projections indicate more frequent and intense warm spells into the future.

Leader of Menzies climate change research program Senior Research Fellow Dr Supriya Mathew said there is an increasing urgency for remote PHC clinics in Australia to work with communities to implement adaptation strategies to mitigate the heat-related health risks to remote residents.

"One of the first steps towards adaptation is to ensure that there is an adequate evidence base that is specific to the remote Central Australian context that can be used to develop a heat-health alert system," Dr Mathew said.

The project will be conducted in partnership with Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and NT Health.

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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.