

From a spokesperson for the Australian Government Department of Health

The Australian Government's Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Baggoley, has been struck by the plight of many Australians suffering a chronic debilitating illness whose lives are in turmoil because their illness cannot be easily diagnosed and treated.

Some patients and their healthcare practitioners believe this chronic debilitating illness is similar to Lyme disease which is found endemically in North America, parts of Europe and parts of Asia. Many of these patients have not travelled overseas to endemic areas.

The community debate within patient groups and the medical profession includes questions about the existence of an indigenous form of Lyme disease in Australia.

So far there is no conclusive evidence of a causative agent in Australia, leading to problems with the accurate diagnosis of Lyme disease or an Australian Lyme disease-like syndrome.

The Australian Government Department of Health has suggested a number of research projects that would assist in clarifying this debilitating illness and this list is provided on the department's website: www.health.gov.au/lyme-disease

Research published by Prof. Peter Irwin at Murdoch University in Perth describes new bacteria in ticks collected from animals in Australia. Whether these bacteria can cause chronic debilitating symptoms, and the implications for human health, have yet to be determined.

Further research by Prof. Irwin describes a study of human-biting ticks from across Australia to identify bacteria that may contribute to Lyme disease-like illness. All 460 ticks tested negative for the bacterium (*Borrelia* species) which causes Lyme disease. Whilst this research did not find *Borrelia* species, several novel bacteria were identified. Discovery of new microorganisms is only part of the story. Attributing disease causation to any one of them requires more research and epidemiological studies.

The Department of Health is working with pathology laboratories domestically and internationally to resolve the discordance in diagnostic tests which remains a problem for Australians seeking a diagnosis of their illness. It is important to have confidence in the testing process so that patients receive optimal treatment related to the cause of their underlying condition.

The Australian Senate has established an inquiry into a Lyme-like illness in Australia. The URL link for making a submission is: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Lyme-like_illness.

Background:

The department continues to:

- consult with members who made up the Chief Medical Officer's Clinical Advisory Committee on Lyme Disease;
- monitor progress made in research;
- work to clarify discordance of test results; and
- to develop a diagnostic pathway with relevant stakeholders.

Information is available on the department's Lyme disease web page at www.health.gov.au/lyme-disease