The Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP
Minister for Aged Care
Minister for Indigenous Health
Member for Hasluck

MEDIA RELEASE

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New Roadmap to Eliminate Rheumatic Heart Disease

The charting of Australia’s first comprehensive roadmap to end rheumatic heart disease (RHD) has begun, with the foundations laid at a roundtable of experts in Darwin, convened by the Indigenous Health Minister, Ken Wyatt AM.

“RHD and acute rheumatic fever take about 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives each year and many of these are young people,” Minister Wyatt said.

“The tragedy is compounded by the fact that RHD is almost entirely preventable, with many organisations, including Governments, grappling strongly with pieces of the RHD elimination puzzle.

“Now, through this roadmap we are determined to tackle the whole challenge and eliminate this disease as a significant Indigenous public health problem.”

RHD is damage to the heart valves caused by repeated bouts of acute rheumatic fever, which is an auto-immune reaction to untreated throat and skin infections. Poor living conditions make these infections and therefore rheumatic fever more likely.

Indigenous children and young adults in the Northern Territory are estimated to suffer from RHD at more than 100 times the rate of their non-Indigenous counterparts. The Kimberley is also an RHD hotspot, with two-thirds of all Western Australian Indigenous people suffering from RHD living in the region.

Telethon Kids Institute Director, Professor Jonathan Carapetis, helped lead off the roundtable, which brought together RHD and infectious diseases specialists, health professionals, Indigenous health advocates, philanthropists, service providers and government agencies.

“RHD is a scourge almost uniquely suffered by Indigenous people in this country, so eliminating it is crucial towards Closing the Gap in health equality,” he said.

“We need comprehensive approaches to RHD control, with the whole community behind us.

“This roundtable is a show of strength towards eliminating RHD, with everyone coming together, saying ‘we want to do this and we want to do this together’.
“This is a pivotal moment in this country to deal with a disease that should be eliminated.”

Minister Wyatt said the Turnbull Government had made a significant investment in RHD prevention, allocating $23.6 million under the Rheumatic Fever Strategy over the next four years. It is also working to address the underlying social and cultural determinants that contribute to RHD, including poor housing.

The Commonwealth has provided $5.4 billion to the states and territories to help them to provide remote housing, under a national agreement. While the agreement is due to end on 30 June 2018, the Commonwealth has begun discussions with State and Territory governments on future funding arrangements.

“While RHD affects children and young adults around the world, in Australia it is a sad reflection of the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children,” Minister Wyatt said.

“We know this is a disease of poverty, of overcrowding, of difficulty with access to health services.

“The roadmap will acknowledge there is no single silver bullet to eliminate RHD. We are now looking to tackle all the determinants - including environmental health, housing and education - as we work together to help strengthen these communities against this devastating disease.”

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