INTERVIEW WITH BRIDGET BRENNAN
ABC RADIO AM

E&OE...

Topics: Announcement of a taskforce to tackle HTLV-1 in remote communities.

SABRA LANE:
As AM reported last month, the blood-borne virus HTLV-1 has been found at astonishingly high rates in Aboriginal communities. There’s been a groundswell of global interest and advocacy since then to gain the attention of governments and the World Health Organisation.

HTLV-1 affects millions around the world, and in some cases, causing a rapidly fatal form of leukaemia and spinal cord disease. Until now, there’s been no public health response, yet today, the Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt is announcing a new $8 million taskforce. Indigenous Affairs correspondent Bridget Brennan is speaking here with Mr Hunt.

GREG HUNT:
This is $8 million to deal with a very significant sexual health and mother-to-baby health issue in Indigenous Australia. HTLV-1 is a blood-borne virus. It can have very, very significant impacts and there’s a lot of stigma, and in many cases, shame, which shouldn’t necessarily need to be there at all.

So we’re launching a taskforce to be led by the Chief Medical Officer and the Indigenous Health Minister Ken Wyatt. Bring those two people together, Indigenous health experts, people who can assist with the medical side in terms of the testing and the treatment, and with the sociocultural side in terms of the education and the confidence to say - this is part of life, it’s important to seek the help. And in that way, we can make a real difference.

BRIDGET BRENNAN:
We have the highest rates of this in the world. Has this been neglected, do you think?
GREG HUNT:
Well, I think it is something that we absolutely have to address. You’re 100 per cent correct, we do have the highest rates in the world in some Indigenous communities. This is something that we need to address in our time, on our watch and that’s what we’re doing. So we want to invite the doctors and the medical specialists, but the only way to get real treatment is if there’s a diagnosis and testing, and that’s about community confidence as well as the resources to do it.

BRIDGET BRENNAN:
And it seems like that hasn’t been happening, because the test isn’t subsidised on the MBS. Surely that will be a main priority of this taskforce, looking into that.

GREG HUNT:
That is one of the important issues to consider, but we also want to make sure that we get out immediately and test. I will be asking Professor Bruce Robinson, who is the head of the Medicare Taskforce, to consider this as part of his assessment over the course of the next six months.

What we want to do is rapid action for early testing to ensure people have diagnosis, and then a comprehensive plan to help build confidence and to help build education and treatment in Indigenous communities.

BRIDGET BRENNAN:
I understand the Chief Medical Officer was speaking with other public health officials in Geneva at the World Health Assembly. How crucial will it be to collaborate with other countries where HTLV-1 has a high prevalence?

GREG HUNT:
We need and we are seeking the help of other countries to understand what has worked in remote communities or comparable Indigenous communities to deal with HTLV-1.

This is a case that we have something to learn from overseas and I think we need to be very honest about that, and that’s precisely why, at this moment, the Chief Medical Officer is at the World Health Assembly and exchanging ideas, information on this and many other issues.

SABRA LANE:
That’s the Health Minister Greg Hunt speaking there with Bridget Brennan.

(ENDS)