

18 April 2019

Funding for Rheumatic Heart Disease will focus on community-led prevention and treatment

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten’s commitment of funding for community-led action on rheumatic heart disease (RHD) is a “significant and magnificent start” to end a disease which is crippling and killing Australian children, 2018 Northern Territory Australian of the Year and the Territory’s only paediatric cardiologist, Dr Bo Reményi, said today.

Dr Reményi welcomed the commitment of \$33 million over the next three years, as a life-saving intervention for a disease which is almost entirely preventable. It’s also an opportunity for other parties to match this commitment to end RHD.

“RHD is the greatest cause of cardiovascular inequality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country – if we can’t end RHD we cannot close the gap in Indigenous and Non-Indigenous health,” said Dr Reményi. “RHD is almost entirely preventable, but Australia has some of the highest rates of the disease in the world, almost exclusively in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.”

Dr Reményi said she had identified children as young as three in the Northern Territory who had advanced RHD, requiring surgery and a lifetime of medication.

“Young children are being subjected to painful treatment and even open-heart surgery, and they are dying way too early,” said Dr Reményi. “This funding commitment rightly invests in local community-led on-the-ground action now to prevent and eliminate RHD. Over time, we will need more funding to end RHD – this will take many years and lots more action – but a national commitment to on-the-ground action now is what we have been seeking and this is a great start,” Dr Reményi said.

Throughout Australia, about 6000 people are known to have RHD or its precursor, acute rheumatic fever (ARF), and rates are increasing – an extra 300 people, mostly children, develop the disease each year. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 64 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to develop rheumatic heart disease, and nearly 20 times as likely to die from it. About 100 people, mainly Indigenous children or adolescents, die from RHD every year.

RHD Australia Senior Cultural Advisor, Vicki Wade, today also welcomed the announcement of additional funding to prevent and eliminate RHD.

“RHD is the best marker for disadvantage between communities, and if we can prevent RHD, we can prevent a lot of other diseases. The social determinants of ARF and RHD are common with many other health problems in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including kidney, skin, eye, ear and respiratory diseases,” Ms Wade said. “Our mob want to see action and change now. We need our communities to take charge now to prevent this unacceptable disease. Change needs to come from our people, our choices, our voices,” she said.

Georgina Byron, CEO of The Snow Foundation, today said the commitment of funding marked a significant step in the quest to end RHD.

“We are united with END RHD in aiming to ensure that no child born in Australia from this day forward should die of RHD or its complications,” Ms Byron said. “We welcome this funding as a solid start to Australia’s commitment in the World Health Assembly in May last year to prevent and eliminate RHD.”

“This additional funding for on-the-ground action in communities is a great start while longer-term strategies come to fruition. We support the recent Coalition and the ALP’s commitment to funding the development of a vaccine to prevent the disease, and we are pleased this on-the-ground work can begin soon to prevent new cases and treat existing cases of RHD in Australia.”

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