



World Health Assembly set to vote on resolution to tackle a national crisis and save Australian lives

A World Health Assembly resolution this week will shine a spotlight on Australia's unacceptably high rates of illness and death from Rheumatic Heart Disease and should act as a catalyst for the Australian Government to take immediate action to fight this devastating disease.

"The situation is urgent – Rheumatic Heart Disease is a national tragedy for Australia, particularly among children," the Northern Territory's 2018 Australian of the Year and paediatric cardiologist, Dr Bo Reményi, said today.

"RHD has been eradicated in many other developed countries but Australia has among the highest rates in the world, and the evidence shows those rates are getting worse. We are lagging far behind other countries, yet this is an entirely preventable disease," said Dr Reményi. "It has taken years of advocacy to get this item on the WHO agenda in Geneva and we are hopeful that it will be the trigger for broader, more immediate action by governments – Federal, state and territory."

"We are using open heart surgery on children as a surgical solution to a preventable problem. In a country such as Australia, this is totally unacceptable."

Dr Reményi has been engaged in the fight against RHD for years and has been highly involved in establishing the international evidence base for preventing and eradicating RHD.

"More than 6000 people are known to be living with RHD and its deadly complications, and there will be many more who as yet are not aware they have the disease. Immediate actions to reduce RHD cases should include sending more doctors, nurses, school nurses and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers and practitioners to communities at risk.

"We need active case finding as part of a comprehensive approach, so children and young people have immediate access to services and treatments which can prevent the disease from progressing to a point that requires open heart surgery," said Dr Reményi.

RHD starts with something as innocent as a sore throat or school sores. About half of all cases begin before the age of 15, and 80 percent by the age of 25. If a child contracts the disease, without regular medication they will likely die in their 20s or 30s. To prevent permanent heart damage, children diagnosed with RHD are required to take at least 130 shots of penicillin over 10 years, a painful regimen that for many is very hard to stick to. Emergency treatment for the most serious cases is usually traumatising and expensive emergency open heart surgery. Heart patients will be on antibiotics for the rest of their lives.

A vote is expected mid-week and Dr Reményi is available for comment about the vote and the government's response. Please contact Kathleen Sweetapple, Communications Media Officer at The Snow Foundation at 0455 22 77 11 or

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