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**MEDIA RELEASE**

**TREK TO ADDRESS RISING RATES OF RHD IN AUSTRALIA**

27/08/2022 - A group of highly experienced doctors, health workers, and First Nations’ leaders from across the nation have gathered to begin a ‘Deadly Heart Trek’ in Queensland, aimed at helping tackle the rising rates of rheumatic heart disease (RHD) amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

While virtually eradicated amongst non-indigenous Australians, rates of RHD in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly those living across northern and central Australia, are the highest in the world.

“If not diagnosed or treated, RHD can cause heart failure, disability, and even death,” Paediatric Cardiologist and Deadly Heart Trek member Dr. Bo Remenyi said.

“Without action, it is estimated that more than 9,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, most under 25 years of age, will develop acute rheumatic fever or RHD by 2031. We must prevent this, through education, the upskilling of local community members, and early detection and treatment - particularly in communities with restricted access to medical facilities.”

Beginning on Thursday Island, the Trek will see two teams travel from Cape York to Mount Isa, visiting communities by invitation, where there is a high burden of disease. It aims to empower Aboriginal leadership and self-determination and demonstrate that RHD needs political action and commitment.

“RHD is a serious health justice issue causing devastation and disruption across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities,” RHDAustralia’s Director and proud Noongar woman Vicki Wade said. “It’s destroying lives through ongoing and painful injections, surgeries for children as young as five, unnecessary deaths and the huge impact all this is having on our communities.

“Yet there is Aboriginal leadership, community demand, collective goodwill and an evidence base in ‘*the RHD Endgame Strategy’* that shows us that we can eliminate this disease, if we take action now; action like this Trek.”

The teams will undertake a range of activities, including:

* Undertaking education, activity and movie sessions for the community, health workers and schools on RHD and acute rheumatic fever
* Promoting skin awareness – to understand skin sores, scabies and their link to RHD
* Holding cardiology clinics for children at school – to treat the disease
* Undertaking heart checks for children – echocardiographic (echo) screening to detect RHD early when available

“Communities each have their own unique experiences and so we will work with local people and the local councils to help understand the impact of RHD on their people, and how we can stop it for good,” Dr Remenyi said.

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**About RHD**

RHD is a preventable disease and if not diagnosed or treated, it can cause heart failure, disability and even death.

It starts with a sore throat or skin sore caused by Strep A bacteria and can permanently damage the heart.

Right now, more than 5000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living with the disease or its precursor, acute rheumatic fever (ARF).

Without taking action, this number will almost double within the next decade.

* 650+ people will likely die, and
* 1300 will need open heart surgery.

The World Health Assembly passed an international resolution in 2018 requiring countries, including Australia (who is a signatory), to prevent and eliminate RHD.

RHD is devastating some Indigenous communities, who need to understand this disease, know how to prevent it, as well as diagnose and treat it.

**The Trek is supported by:**

* Far North Queensland Hospital Foundation <https://www.fnqhf.org.au/>
* RHDAustralia <https://www.rhdaustralia.org.au/>
* The Snow Foundation <https://www.snowfoundation.org.au/>
* Take Heart : Deadly Heart (Moonshine) <https://takeheartrhd.com/>
* Violet Co <https://www.violetco.com.au/>
* NT Cardiac <https://www.ntcardiac.com.au/>
* One Disease <https://www.onedisease.org/>
* Humpty Dumpty Foundation <https://humpty.com.au/>
* Orange Sky <https://orangesky.org.au/>
* Heart Kids <https://www.heartkids.org.au/>
* The Heart Foundation <https://www.heartfoundation.org.au/>

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