

MEDIA RELEASE

TREK TO ADDRESS RISING RATES OF RHD IN AUSTRALIA

18/03/2023 - A group of highly experienced multi-disciplinary doctors, paediatric cardiologists, health workers, Aboriginal leaders and the local community have gathered in Alice Springs to launch the third major leg of the 'Deadly Heart Trek' through Central Australia.

Two dedicated teams of 8 will visit 22 communities with the aim of educating, treating and diagnosing local Aboriginal communities affected by rheumatic heart disease (RHD).

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 some of the highest in the world and are increasing. While the Trek members acknowledge the Federal Government's increased commitment of \$13.5 million annually for the elimination of RHD, the critical work NACCHO is doing in communities, and the action by several state governments, more must be done.

"If not diagnosed or treated, RHD can cause heart failure, disability, and even death," Paediatric Cardiologist and Deadly Heart Trek member Dr Gavin Wheaton said, "currently there are approximately 10,000 people living with RHD/acute rheumatic fever, 80% or more of these are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Without action, it is estimated the amount of people who will develop acute rheumatic fever or RHD by 2031 will almost double, most of them Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and most of them under 25. 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."

Two previous Treks, to NT and QLD, provided over 1800 young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with heart screenings and skin checks for scabies and skin sores.

"Thankfully, we found plenty of healthy hearts," Paediatric Cardiologist and Deadly Heart Trek leader Dr Bo Remenyi said. "Unfortunately, we also diagnosed and treated 54 new RHD cases. Without rapid intervention, these young people will need, at best, a lifetime of care, and at worst, open heart surgery."

Senior Noongar woman and Trek member Vicki Wade added, "RHD is a serious health justice issue causing devastation and disruption across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. 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."

On the Central Australia Trek, the teams will undertake a range of activities, including:

- Undertaking heart checks for children – echocardiographic (echo) screening to detect RHD
- Doing skin checks and promoting skin awareness – to understand skin sores, scabies and their link to RHD
- Undertaking education for the community, health workers and schools on RHD

“We want to acknowledge the two experienced Trek teams of 8, volunteering their time to make this Trek happen, as well as the Heart Foundation, HeartKids, GE Healthcare, AMSANT, Take Heart and The Snow Foundation for their support,” Dr Remenyi said.

“We’ve had a lot of consultation and engagement already with communities, who have invited us to come, and we look forward to continuing to work together to end RHD.”

ENDS

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, around 10,000 people are living with the disease or its precursor, acute rheumatic fever (ARF). The majority are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (9 out of 10, ARF and 8 out of 10, RHD – according to the AIHW).

Without 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.

This Trek is supported by:

- The Snow Foundation <https://www.snowfoundation.org.au/>
- The Heart Foundation <https://www.heartfoundation.org.au/>
- Take Heart : Deadly Heart (Moonshine) <https://takeheartrhd.com/>
- Violet Co <https://www.violetco.com.au/>
- NT Cardiac <https://www.ntcardiac.com.au/>
- Humpty Dumpty Foundation <https://humpty.com.au/>
- Heart Kids <https://www.heartkids.org.au/>
- AMSANT - <https://www.amsant.org.au/>
- G E Healthcare - <https://www.gehealthcare.com.au/>

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