



Media release

Minister for Health and Ambulance Services

The Honourable Yvette D'Ath

New plan to improve heart health in First Nations communities

Queensland has announced a new strategy dedicated to reducing the impact of acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease in Queensland.

Minister for Health and Ambulance Services Yvette D'Ath released the *Ending Rheumatic Heart Disease: Queensland First Nations Strategy 2021-2024* today (4 March).

Minister D'Ath said Queensland was leading the way with a targeted action plan, and now a strategy, to address the prevalence of Acute Rheumatic Fever (ARF) and Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) among First Nations peoples.

“Both RHD and ARF are preventable conditions. Unfortunately, Australia has some of the highest documented rates of RHD in the world, with a significant number of patients living in the north of the Queensland,” Minister D'Ath said.

“This strategy will strengthen Queensland’s response across the health system, from early prevention, to the care and support of those living with ARF and RHD.

“The Queensland Government has committed \$4.5 million over three years to implement this strategy.

“In addition to this, there will also be a further \$2.88 million for specific actions in 10 communities across northern Queensland, where our data shows some of the highest rates of RHD and ARF and where need is the greatest.

“This additional funding will also provide support for the development of a specific RHD health workforce plan, and a research agenda.”

RHD, a potentially fatal condition where a person's heart valves have become stretched or scarred, is caused by repeated cases of ARF, an illness caused by the body's autoimmune response to strep bacteria.

Heart valve damage, caused by ARF and RHD is likely to require surgery. Blood may flow backward through stretched valves that do not close properly, or may be blocked due to scarred valves not opening properly. When the heart is damaged in this way, the heart valves are unable to function adequately, and surgery may be required.

Untreated, RHD causes heart failure and those affected are at risk of arrhythmias, stroke, endocarditis and pregnancy complications. These conditions cause progressive disability, reduce quality of life and can lead to premature death.

Young people aged between 5 to 14 years – particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - are at the highest risk of developing the condition.

The Strategy involves a range of health partners and aims to deliver equity of access and outcomes for Queensland's First Peoples. It builds on the earlier 2018 Action Plan to address RHD.

"RHD is serious. Currently, there are more than 3000 patients on the RHD register in Queensland," the Minister said.

To view the strategy, [visit the Queensland Health website](#).

FAST FACTS

- Australia has amongst the highest documented rates of ARF (a precursor to RHD) and RHD globally.
- In Queensland, there are currently 3089 patients active on the Queensland Rheumatic Heart Disease Register and Control Program.
 - 73 per cent of these patients in Queensland are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and 48 per cent are based in Far North Queensland.
- Without major intervention, an additional 10,212 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are predicted to experience ARF or develop RHD by 2031.

ENDS

Media contact: 3708 5376