



Media Release

Poor housing conditions contribute to high rates of resistant golden staph infections in remote Aboriginal communities

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One of the world's most prestigious medical journals has reported a new and serious threat to the health of Indigenous Australians.

The June 2008 edition of the Chicago-based *Clinical Infectious Diseases* journal featured a report by Northern Territory-based researchers on the emergence of antibiotic-resistant infections in Aboriginal communities.

Researchers describe a growing problem with community-associated Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) in Aboriginal communities across northern Australia and believe the growing epidemic is particularly related to continuing poor skin health and poor quality and overcrowded housing.

Staphylococcus aureus is a common cause of skin infections such as boils, abscesses and skin sores. It may also cause more severe bone, joint and bloodstream infections. More resistant forms of *Staphylococcus aureus* called MRSA have been a major problem in the hospital environment, but more recently is also causing disease in community patients who have had no contact with hospitals.

First described in 1989 in Aboriginal patients from the Kimberley region in WA, strains of community-associated MRSA have subsequently emerged from other areas of Australia, including a strain unique to northern Australia.

Lead author, Steven Tong, says that the emergence of community-associated MRSA is likely driven by domestic crowding, poor hygiene and high rates of skin infections such as scabies, tinea and skin sores and the subsequent use of antibiotics.

"Controlling this epidemic will involve novel community based strategies and improvements in health hardware," Steven Tong said. "The combination of high rates of *Staphylococcus aureus* infections, overcrowding in poor quality houses, non-working housing hardware, such as toilets and showers mean that rates of MRSA will continue to be higher in Aboriginal communities in central and northern Australian than other Australian communities."

Chief executive of the CRC for Aboriginal Health, Mick Gooda, said the new report highlighted the urgent need for improvements to existing housing and a major investment into additional housing in remote Northern Australia.

"Studies point to extreme overcrowding in Aboriginal houses with one finding up to 7.5 people per bedroom and another indicating that nearly 60% of houses have no working facilities for washing children or clothes," said Mick Gooda. "These sorts of conditions make it next to impossible to control scabies and other skin diseases which often lead to antibiotic use and ultimately to development of resistant strains."

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To read the CIS journal article go to: <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/cid/current>