



Media Release

TAKING HEALTHY SKIN MESSAGE TO TIWI ISLANDS

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The Tiwi Islands community of Nguiu will hear today about the importance of combating skin disease from two female Aboriginal community health workers who played a key role in delivering a healthy skin program in the Northern Territory's East Arnhem region.

Roslyn Dhurrkay from the East Arnhem community of Galiwinku is travelling to the Tiwi Islands this morning with North Queensland Cowboy players as part of the National Rugby League and Darwin-based Menzies School of Health Research's 'Tackling Health Head On' program.

The two women are among 11 health workers who successfully graduated earlier this month from an accredited primary health care training program developed by Menzies and delivered as part of the East Arnhem Regional Healthy Skin Program.

The program, partly funded by the CRC for Aboriginal Health (CRAH), aimed to reduce the regional prevalence of scabies, skin sores and tinea for children aged 0-14 years living in the East Arnhem communities of Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwinku, Marthakal Homelands, Yirrkala, Marngarr, Gapuwiyak and the Laynhapuy Homelands.

Over a three-year period the community health workers went from house to house in their local communities to check children for skin infections, which have in turn been linked to a range of serious health conditions including kidney disease, rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease

Project Leader, Associate Professor Ross Andrews from the Menzies School of Health Research, paid tribute to the community health workers' commitment to tackling skin infections.

"Over the last three years, these women have been involved in doing over 6,000 skin checks on nearly 2,500 children," Assoc Prof Andrews said.

"When they first started, 46 children out of every 100 seen in their communities had skin sores. By the time we had finished, the skin sore burden had almost halved, equivalent to saving 18 children in every 100 from skin sores."

CRAH Chief Executive Mick Gooda said it was vital that lessons learnt from the Healthy Skin program were communicated to other Aboriginal communities around Australia.

"Indigenous Australians have one of the highest rates of rheumatic heart disease in the world," he said. "The more we can get the healthy skin message out to communities, such as Nguiu, the more likely we will be to cut the incidence of these chronic conditions."

“This is a great example of what can be achieved by working in partnership with local communities, government and researchers. These women were employed in a real job, they have come out of it with a real qualification and they have helped to make a real difference within their home communities – full credit to them.”

Mr Gooda added that the Healthy Skin program’s model of community outreach services by community-based workers is one that could be adopted as part of the provision of core primary health care services in remote communities.

Assoc Prof Andrews said that while the program had achieved impressive reductions in rates of skin infection among children, the health burden remained unacceptably high.

“Unless we address the underlying causes of these extremely high rates of skin infections – such as overcrowding, difficulties with sanitation, poor educational outcomes and continuing socioeconomic disadvantage – it is unlikely that we can achieve lasting reductions in health impacts,” he said.

For more information, contact:

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To read a CRCAH Fact Sheet on the East Arnhem Healthy Skin Project:

www.crcah.org.au/publications