

Media Release

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS DYING FROM HIV-RELATED INFECTION

(Canberra: Monday, 6th November 2017): As new [national statistics](#)¹ reveal an unprecedented spike in new HIV infections in Indigenous Australians, a little known HIV-related virus has been found to be highly endemic to Australia's remote communities. However most people with the infection don't even know they have it.

"We are desperately seeking action and commitment from Government to eradicate this deadly virus," says Dr Lloyd Einsiedel, Executive Director Central Australia, Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute, who is holding a special session on the topic at the [Australasian HIV&AIDS and Sexual Health Conferences](#) in Canberra today.

HTLV-1 is a virus that is acquired from breast milk; sex and – prior to the introduction of testing of HTLV-1 – blood transfusions. Indigenous communities in central Australia have the highest prevalence rates in the world, exceeding 50 per cent for adults in some remote communities surveyed so far. The virus is associated with a rapidly fatal form of leukaemia, inflammation in various organs including the lungs, and an increased risk of other infections.

To date, there has been no coordinated response to either inform Indigenous residents of the existence of the virus or to suggest strategies that could reduce their risk of acquiring it. Health experts gathered at the conferences now demand action.

HTLV-1, like HIV, affects the immune system, however not everyone infected with HTLV-1 goes on to develop a life threatening medical condition. For those that do, the prognosis is very poor with a high risk of complications and death. For example, HTLV-1-associated bronchiectasis, a chronic lung disease, is a leading cause of death for young adults at the Alice Springs hospital.

The Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM) – led by the recently deceased CEO Levinia Crooks – has been spearheading efforts to push for a national response, but says that little has been done since the virus was first found in remote communities in 1988.

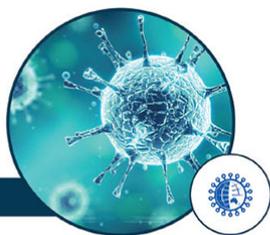
"The recognition of HTLV-1 as an emerging issue in the previous Fourth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander BBV National Strategy was a positive step towards action on this issue. However, this recognition has not transformed into further funding for action or research on HTLV-1. ASHM has continued to advocate for inclusion of HTLV-1 as a Priority Area for Action throughout the development of the Fifth National Strategy, expected to be released in 2018," said ASHM's Acting CEO Scott McGill.

"We urgently need to better understand the effect of this virus in Indigenous communities and this must be done with Indigenous guidance and leadership," said Dr Einsiedel.

"In the meantime, there are things we could and should be doing:

- HTLV-1 should be added to the list of diseases that are preventable with safe sex;
- We need a health literacy program to inform people of this virus and its major modes of transmission;
- Research is needed to understand the risk factors for transmission to Indigenous children and to develop a culturally appropriate response;

¹ To be published at this address on Monday 6th November 2017



- We need education for the public and health care workers - confusion with HIV is common, even in health care settings;
- We need research to determine how the virus causes inflammation so that we can develop therapeutic agents, and
- We need a vaccine.

But most importantly, we need recognition of the problem and a commitment to do something about this,” he said.

Interview: Dr Lloyd Einsiedel, Executive Director Central Australia, Baker Heart & Diabetes Institute

Media Contact: Petrana Lorenz 0405 158 636 petrana@arkcommunications.com.au

OTHER HOT TOPICS

MEDIA EVENT: Monday 6 November 2017

Latest national statistics for STIs and HIV

Release of Australia’s annual report card on STIs and blood borne viruses – [The Annual Surveillance Reports](#) – from the Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales

MEDIA RELEASE: Monday 6 November 2017

Undiagnosed HIV in heterosexual Australians

Health experts gathered at the Australasian HIV & AIDS Conference in Canberra this week are calling for more to be done to address inequalities in HIV efforts.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- **Rise of Gonorrhoea in Australian heterosexuals**
- [Health professionals treating transgender on the front line of a civil rights struggle](#)
- [HIV Prevention in Dangerous Times: HIV soars in the Philippines](#)
- [Why Are Some Gay And Bisexual Men Eligible For Prep But Not Taking It?](#)
- **Canberra PrEP trial: what have we learnt from other states?**

To view the full program or list of speakers please visit the [Australasian HIV & Sexual Health Conferences website](#).

ABOUT THE AUSTRALASIAN HIV&AIDS CONFERENCE 2017

The Australasian HIV&AIDS Conference (27th Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine) is the premier HIV Conference in Australia and the Asia and Pacific region. The annual conference is run by ASHM as a platform for the dissemination and presentation of new and innovative research findings across the Australasian HIV sector. Delegates to the conference come from a range of professional backgrounds including basic science, clinical medicine, community programs, education, epidemiology, indigenous health, international and regional issues, nursing and allied health, policy, primary care, public health and prevention, and social research.

The conference is health back to back with the [Australasian Sexual Health Conference](#).

END

Media Contact: Petrana Lorenz 0405 158 636 petrana@arkcommunications.com.au