



Media release

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Viral hepatitis: the silent killer impacting Indigenous communities globally

In a world first, Indigenous people from all corners of the globe will travel to central Australia to discuss the overwhelming burden of viral hepatitis in Indigenous communities and what can be done to address this world-wide.

Over 250 delegates from every continent will attend the inaugural *World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Viral Hepatitis*, to be held 14-16 September in Alice Springs.

'This is a pivotal time for Indigenous people all over the world,' say conference co-convenors A/Prof James Ward of Baker IDI in Alice Springs and Prof Chris Cunningham Chair of the Hepatitis Foundation of New Zealand. 'The rates of death and illness caused by viral hepatitis among Indigenous peoples far exceed that of non-Indigenous peoples, and continue to increase. This is a global concern and one that requires urgent attention and action,' they conclude.

A focus of the Meeting is the abysmal level of treatment uptake for both Hepatitis B and C; in Australia alone, treatment uptake is as low as 5%. A contrasting experience in New Zealand for Māori has seen higher rates of immunisation for Hepatitis B, but still significant challenges in surveillance and treatment services, for both B and C viruses.

Viral hepatitis is the leading cause of liver cancer, which is threatening many Indigenous communities, including Indigenous peoples in Greenland, Peru, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, the USA and Canada all who will be represented at this inaugural meeting. More needs to be done to turn the tide on viral hepatitis in Indigenous communities and this inaugural conference is the first opportunity to talk solutions.

Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people representing just 3% of the total Australian population, Indigenous people comprise around 15% of all the people living with chronic hepatitis B and rates of hepatitis C are around three times that of non-Indigenous Australians.

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

The Inaugural World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Viral Hepatitis will be held back-to-back with the 9th Australasian Viral Hepatitis Conference in Alice Springs.

The vision for the Meeting is to be a forum to examine the health burden of viral hepatitis in Indigenous peoples, to share common experiences and innovative solutions and to develop new relationships which enable collective responses into the future. This is intended to be the first of a series of such meetings.



The program will reflect the breadth of work underway in this area, spanning human rights, development, community engagement, basic science research, clinical service provision, healthcare delivery and public health and prevention. The involvement of Indigenous peoples in all aspects of the project is the key to its success.

ABOUT VIRAL HEPATITIS

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. It is possible for the body to clear itself of both hepatitis C and hepatitis B without medical intervention. After the initial or “acute” phase of hepatitis B infection, most adults will clear the virus but around 5% will develop an ongoing or “chronic” infection. If a child contracts hepatitis B, around 90% will develop a chronic infection. For hepatitis C, around 80% of those who contract the virus will develop a chronic infection. Without appropriate treatment, people with these chronic infections can progress to liver failure or liver cancer. Viral hepatitis is the No.1 cause of demand for liver transplants in Australia and New Zealand. Deaths from hepatitis-related liver cancer are growing at the same pace as deaths from melanoma and will treble by 2030. Viral hepatitis is the cause of 1.5 million deaths worldwide, every year.

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