

Don't be shame. Be game – how regional multilevel and cross sectoral approaches with resourcing can control syphilis

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Background/Purpose:

North Queensland and northern Australia have experienced a prolonged syphilis outbreak since 2011, predominantly affecting, heterosexual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people resulting in substantial morbidity including cases of congenital syphilis.

Approach:

In North Queensland a five-year funded regional response, was implemented to reduce cases of syphilis. The strategy had five pillars: 1. a strengthened regional approach, 2. health promotion and prevention, 3. testing and treatment, 4. better health services, 5. monitoring and evaluation. Working closely with Aboriginal and Islander Community Controlled Health Services and other organisations, multiple strategies were implemented to increase access to health care, to improve testing and treatment pathways. Health promotion initiatives included increased 24-hour condom access, community awareness raising and mobilisation to attend community screens, promotion of antenatal care and testing, and collaboration with the Department of Education for age-appropriate school sexual health and relationships education. Regular reports and updates to health services were provided as part of the monitoring and evaluation.

Outcomes/Impact:

Locally-led, community-informed responses that were multilevel, with many services and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise, succeeded in controlling the outbreak in most North Queensland regions by 2023. The last recorded cases of congenital syphilis in North Queensland occurred in 2022 and there has not been a death associated with congenital syphilis in this region since 2018.

Innovation and Significance:

This work demonstrates the importance of appropriate and sustained funding, localised approaches, that are multilevel, and cross sectoral as well as strong leadership and involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can lead to improved outcomes. These lessons are particularly important today, given sustained and increasing syphilis cases throughout much of Australia.

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