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MEDIA RELEASE

LEPROSY: SENDING AID TO PNG PROTECTS OURSELVES

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GREATER support for public health programs combating leprosy in Papua New Guinea will protect Far North Queensland from the possible spread of the rarely-acquired disease and other infectious disease, according to the authors of a research letter published today in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Leprosy, an infection caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, is endemic in Papua New Guinea (PNG), with 388 new cases notified in 2015, and the annual number changing little over the past decade.

The authors of the research letter, led by Dr Alison Hempenstall, a registrar based at Thursday Island Hospital, reviewed all laboratory-confirmed cases diagnosed in FNQ between 1989 and 2018. They aimed to determine if the ongoing transmission of leprosy in PNG had had any impact on Australians.

“Since 1985, Torres Strait Islander Australians and PNG nationals have been able to move freely across the border to pursue traditional activities in the Torres Strait Protected Zone,” Hempenstall and colleagues wrote. “This arrangement acknowledges the importance of their shared cultural history, but the potential public health implications are also clear.”

There were 20 cases of leprosy recorded in the Queensland Health Notifiable Conditions Register during the study period; 11 patients were born in Australia, including seven Torres Strait Islanders. There were no cases among Aboriginal Australians. A 28-year old Torres Strait Islander woman diagnosed in 2009 was the most recent Australian-born case; she had had close contact with a person with leprosy born in PNG.

“However, while there has been no case of locally acquired leprosy since 2009, two PNG-born Torres Strait Islanders have been diagnosed with the disease in the past decade. The continuous flow of people between Australia and PNG makes ongoing vigilance essential.”

Australia will provide an estimated \$608 million in development assistance to PNG during 2019–20, the authors said, with some of that going towards the public health system and NGOs involved in containing leprosy.

“However, more could be done,” Hempenstall and colleagues concluded.

“Leprosy is a disabling and infectious condition that can be rapidly cured. Public health programs have dramatically reduced the burden of infectious diseases in Australia. Greater support for similar programs in PNG will not only help our nearest neighbours, but will also reduce the risk of reappearance of infectious diseases – like leprosy – that have been almost forgotten by Australians.”

Please remember to credit *The MJA*.

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