

COMMUNITY MOURNS AS CRACKS IN SYSTEM TAKE TOLL

Lives fall through



ON THE ROAD
AARON LANGMAID

IT'S the wet season in Arnhem Land but it hasn't rained for days. The dancers hose down the hot red sand just so they can stamp their feet.

They raise their hands and cry out for this — a funeral for a footballer.

It has been the same song for weeks now. Part of the month-long mourning since the young man died of a Third World disease in a land that should be far removed from it.

He had paced well against his opponents that day but stumbled off the field in the final quarter, heaving and holding his chest.

He collapsed and died on the sidelines in a scene too often repeated across the Top End. Another life lost to rheumatic heart disease — the ugly plague that extends its reach each day like cracks through the dry earth.

The traditional sounds of a didgeridoo have twisted through the trees each night since his death, drawing family and friends in Maningrida for their final farewells.

His body lies in state — a symbolic shelter of tin and leaves and branches.

In the final hours before the burial, only the scorching afternoon heat cuts through the rising dust and sadness.

Children's faces are brushed with paint. Some carry flowers. Women wail and beat their chests. Others cry out to the spirit of the dead man as if hoping to clear a path for his soul — a final honour for a life that should never have ended like this.

Latest statistics reveal Australia has the highest reported rate of acute rheumatic fever in the world.

Indigenous Australians are 20 times more likely to die from the full-blown rheumatic heart disease. It breeds on the



Jethro Pascoe, 6, at the funeral of an Arnhem Land footy player who died of rheumatic heart disease, and (right) traditional mourning dances. Pictures: JAKE NOWAKOWSKI

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skin of the men, women and children crammed inside broken houses, against wet floors and deadly bacteria.

The fever is an autoimmune response to the group A streptococcus virus, which presents in patients as a hoarse throat or skin sores. Untreated, it eventually puts pressure on heart valves.

Boys and young men are at the greatest risk. It has not been ruled out as a possible cause of another indigenous

footballer's death in Cairns just last week.

Heart Foundation cultural lead Vicki Wade said it should not be a health issue in Australia. "It is a disease of poverty and poor living standards. It is our national shame," she said.

The disease was preventable and was all but eradicated in the developed world — except here. "There are critical intervention points where indigenous people fall

through the gaps," she said.

Echocardiograms or heart scans available in some settlements help identify patients at risk and ensure referrals to cardiologists, but education is a vital element.

Aborigines tend to put their health concerns last, with many often reluctant to visit health clinics because they fear any treatment might not be culturally appropriate.

RHD Australia deputy director Claire Boardman said



the disease was almost exclusive to indigenous communities. "There are more than 5200 patients listed on the state-based registers, with more than 3500 having progressed to rheumatic heart disease," she said.

It's hoped establishing a data collection system to identify patient numbers across communities would streamline the distribution of penicillin, required every 28 days in patients.

But indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion said banning the use of the drug kava could also serve as a far more tangible step.

The plant-based drug used in cultural practices has been linked to sudden cardiac deaths in Arnhem. "It is hurting our First Australians, it's destroying lives ... we have to get on to this as a Government," he said.

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