

## **Rheumatic heart disease rampant in Timor-Leste: new study**

**Monday 16 April 2018**

Australia's northern neighbour Timor-Leste has one of the world's highest rates of rheumatic heart disease, with one in 28 people affected and as many as one in 20 girls, new research shows.

The findings come from landmark research involving 1400 school children. It was the first to measure the prevalence of rheumatic heart disease (RHD) in Timor-Leste.

The Medical Journal of Australia has just published the study. It found the incidence of RHD in Timor-Leste was equal to many of the countries that have the highest rates. Timor-Leste had 35 borderline and definite cases per thousand, compared to 25 per thousand in high-risk indigenous communities in Australia.

The study noted that the findings may be conservative, as some children with RHD may have been too unwell to attend school when heart screening for the research was conducted last October.

"These findings are devastating. Without urgent action this is a disaster in the making for our neighbours in Timor-Leste," said Stuart Thomson, the CEO of Australian medical NGO East Timor Hearts Fund.

"Untreated rheumatic heart disease kills young people in their prime, in their teens and early 20s, robbing this young nation of its best and brightest and causing untold misery."

Mr Thomson said East Timor Hearts Fund commissioned the study, with the support of project partners including Menzies School of Health Research and Telethon Kids Institute, to push for more effective action on RHD in Timor-Leste.

East Timor Hearts Fund was also seeking further funding to conduct more research into the unexpected finding that girls are significantly more likely to have RHD than boys. Five per cent (one in 20) of girls screened for the study had RHD, compared to 2 per cent of boys (one in 50).

RHD is a preventable, treatable form of cardiovascular disease that affects more than 32 million people worldwide, and claims 275,000 lives a year, according to the World Heart Federation. Episodes of acute rheumatic fever, caused by strep bacteria infections of the skin or throat, trigger it. This leads to inflammation that damages heart valves.

Study leader and East Timor Hearts Fund RHD adviser Dr Josh Francis supported action on preventative health.

"This includes measures to tackle underlying risks such as poverty and household crowding; and penicillin to treat the infections that can lead to RHD," Dr Francis said.

Dr Francis called for urgent action tackle the high rate of RHD in women and girls in Timor-Leste. "RHD can be particularly dangerous for mothers and babies during pregnancy and childbirth so this is an urgent priority."

**Stuart Thomson is available for interview.**

**Media enquiries:** Ingrid Svendsen 0409 007 530 [ingrid.svendsen@easttimorhearts.org.au](mailto:ingrid.svendsen@easttimorhearts.org.au)

**East Timor Hearts Fund** ABN 59 160 158 074

PO Box 5146, Melbourne, VIC, 3001 **TEL** +61 3 8602 7225 **FAX** +61 3 9609 1600 **EMAIL** [info@easttimorheartsfund.org.au](mailto:info@easttimorheartsfund.org.au)

**[www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au](http://www.easttimorheartsfund.org.au)**