ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

MEDIA RELEASE

Surgeons: Aboriginal ear health should be higher priority

Friday 3 June, 2016

With National Reconciliation Week today drawing to a close, surgeons are urging political and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander leaders to put a higher priority on ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to regular hearing checks.

President of the ASOHNS (Australian Society of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery) and ear nose and throat surgeon Dr Chris Perry says disadvantage is being compounded by a 'pandemic of deafness' among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

"One quarter of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory and more than one third in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands in the remote north west of South Australia have eardrum perforations from chronic ear infections," Dr Perry said.

"Otitis media, or middle ear infections, are not a normal part of childhood - yet we are seeing extraordinarily high rates of hearing loss from this condition. This damage is preventable.

"Up to 91 per cent of Aboriginal children have deafness for more than three months of the year, and 100 per cent have an ear infection under the age of three months.

"We know that ear disease and associated hearing loss can lead to delayed speech and educational development, low self-esteem, unemployment and a range of other health, social and economic problems.

"If children can't hear their teachers they become bored and troublesome. They may become truant, leave school early, and then be stuck with no job or income. It may lead to substance abuse problems, or gaol.

"Surgeons would like to see a more co-ordinated national approach to such a devastating problem. Why isn't ear disease one of the measurable objectives in the Closing the Gap health outcomes? Why isn't there a coordinated, national program? How are teachers supposed to cope in a classroom where up to 90 per cent of the children may be deaf?

"The Queensland Deadly Ears program has been tackling the pandemic of Aboriginal ear disease for ten years, with considerable success. We need national leadership and support to make this an Australia-wide program.

"The average Aboriginal child, more so in the bush than the city, has hearing loss for 32 months of their first five years compared to three months for a non-Aboriginal child.

"Let's end this national disgrace by adequately funding a national program which will help reduce the high rates of hearing loss in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children."

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) has included Aboriginal ear health as a priority in its 2016 Australian Federal Election Position Statement. RACS also released its Reconciliation Action Plan this week on June 1.

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About RACS

RACS is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in Australia and New Zealand. The College is a not-for-profit organisation that represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and International Medical Graduates. RACS also supports healthcare and surgical education in the Asia-Pacific region and is a substantial funder of surgical research. There are nine surgical specialties in Australasia being: Cardiothoracic surgery, General surgery, Neurosurgery, Orthopaedic surgery, Otolaryngology Head-and-Neck surgery, Paediatric surgery, Plastic and Reconstructive surgery, Urology and Vascular surgery.
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