

## The RHD Endgame Strategy: Evidence Brief #2

### *Increasing access to community laundromats in remote communities*

Ensuring that people have facilities to wash clothes and bedding may reduce the rates of Strep A skin infection by reducing the risk of transmission of Strep A (particularly from heavily contaminated clothing), scabies and crusted scabies.<sup>1</sup> However access to sufficient resources for people to wash clothing and bedding is limited in many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To combat this, a number of community laundries have been built to enhance access,<sup>2,3</sup> but there is presently no evidence to compare the health effect of living in a community with or without a communal washing machine.

The continued construction of community laundries over many years points to strong community demand, though there has been limited evaluation. One evaluated program in the 1990s in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands saw the installation of 44 commercial washing machines across two communities. Usage of the machines was very high, however, health outcomes were not assessed.<sup>4</sup>

A contemporary laundromat program was initiated in 2019 by the Aboriginal Investment Group (AIG). The AIG Remote Laundries Project aims to reduce instances of scabies, trachoma and RHD while improving school attendance and contributing to community employment opportunities through the provision of community laundromats. Large shipping containers are converted to fit four washers and dryers linked to soap and water, with room for laundry preparation and folding. As of mid-2020, AIG manages one project in the Northern Territory and are scoping out further locations in consultation with local groups.<sup>3</sup> The cost of use was set at \$4 per wash and \$4 per dry but has since been made free and funded by donations.<sup>5</sup> The project cost was \$242,000<sup>5</sup> and further locations are currently being scoped.

Attempts to maximise the impact of community laundromats have involved the development of construction standards in the Northern Territory. Environmental health standards indicate that commercial-grade washing machines are needed in at least two locations within a community in a ratio of one machine/trough for every 50 people.<sup>6</sup> The optimum model for providing community laundry services has not been identified.

Community laundries may also offer the potential for community income and employment. While it appears that construction can occur relatively quickly, sustained maintenance and supervision of facilities can be challenging. Community consultation and governance arrangements are also likely to be critical for sustainability of the program but may take time.

Access to laundromats may enhance equity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people if they improve access to washing. Risks of inequality may occur if not all members of a community have access to the laundromat, or if they are prohibitively expensive.

#### **Recommendations**

- There is no empiric evidence about the health impact of community laundries. However, community demand appears to signal an unmet need.
- The construction of laundromats requires significant community consultation.
- Evaluation of existing community laundromat programs is required to understand impact and develop effective models of operation.

## About the END RHD CRE

In 2014, The End Rheumatic Heart Disease Centre of Research Excellence (END RHD CRE) was established to address the urgent need for a comprehensive, evidence-based plan to eliminate rheumatic heart disease across Australia.

Bringing together leading experts from 16 institutions across Australia and backed by a grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the CRE has synthesised the collective experience of communities, clinicians, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, and government and non-government organisations – as well as more than 25 years of research – to tackle this need head on.

The result is *The RHD Endgame Strategy: The blueprint to eliminate rheumatic heart disease in Australia by 2031*. Outlining the best existing evidence-based strategies to prevent new cases of RHD in Australia and improve the lives of those already living with the disease, The RHD Endgame Strategy was launched in October 2020 and can be viewed at [telethonkids.org.au/rhd-endgame](https://telethonkids.org.au/rhd-endgame).

## Acknowledgements

The RHD Endgame Strategy is a product of collaboration between researchers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, communities and people with lived experience.

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## References

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