Media Release

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ADHB removes gloves in fight against rheumatic fever

More than 4000 primary and secondary-aged students across 16 central Auckland schools will soon take part in a programme that aims to reduce the rates of rheumatic fever in the city’s most vulnerable communities.

Launching in early August, the initiative will involve taking throat swabs from five-to-14-year-old students with sore throats to identify and treat cases of Group A streptococcus, the bacteria that can lead to rheumatic fever.

Auckland DHB currently runs a school throat swabbing programme in two Auckland schools but has significantly widened the initiative to align with Government’s ‘Better Public Service Targets’ of reducing the incidence of rheumatic fever by two-thirds over the next four years.

In addition to delivering a school-based throat-swabbing programme, Auckland DHB will include a health literacy component that aims to educate children and their families about the signs, symptoms and risks of a sore throat which if untreated can lead to rheumatic fever and possible heart damage. Health workers will also work with local services to address other common health concerns, such as skin infections and housing issues.

Auckland DHB Director of Child Health Services Dr Richard Aickin believes immediate action and long-term education are key components towards curbing the prevalence of this illness. “Our programme will be about identifying and treating cases now and following-up as needed while also educating children and families about the risks associated with rheumatic fever and what they can do to prevent the illness in the future,” Dr Aickin said.

Approximately 160 people are diagnosed with acute rheumatic fever in New Zealand every year, with school-aged Māori and Pacific children being the most susceptible. Research shows that the rates of rheumatic fever in Pacific Island children in Auckland are 69 times higher than the rates for non-Pacific and non-Maori groups and 47 times higher in Maori children than for non-Maori and non-Pacific children.

“We’ve worked hard to identify the most vulnerable groups and communities in Auckland and our focus is to turn the tide in these areas,” Dr Aickin said.

Auckland DHB is currently in the process of working with primary health care providers, schools, health agencies and other community organisations to ensure a collaborative approach towards delivering this important programme.

ENDS

Notes to the editor:

- Reducing the incidence of rheumatic fever (RF) by two-thirds to 1.4 cases per 100,000 nationally by 2017 is one of the Government’s ‘Better Public Service’ targets to support vulnerable children.
- Earlier in the month, the Government announced that its fight to reduce New Zealand’s high rate of rheumatic fever among children will receive an additional $21.3 million over four years in Budget 2013.
- Auckland DHB has a target of reducing the incidence within its catchment area from 3.5:100,000 to 1.2:100,000 by 2017.
- The incidence in New Zealand is 14 times the OECD average
- Rheumatic fever is a serious disease and can cause long-term damage to the heart. It often starts with a sore throat caused by a bug (streptococcal infection) and a few weeks after the “strep” throat, a child may develop sore or swollen joints, a skin rash, a fever, stomach pain or jerky movements.
- If identified, Group A streptococcus can be easily treated by a course of antibiotics.

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