

ONE DISEASE AT A TIME: ERADICATING SCABIES IN EAST ARNHEM LAND

Inspirational leadership can make a difference to Aboriginal health, writes **Sara Hudson**

If the will was behind solutions rather than focusing on the problems there would be a significant win.

— Dr Sam Prince

In 1976, a government report noted that the ‘poor health of Aboriginal people is a matter for concern ... low incomes, poor housing conditions and lack of appropriate knowledge continue to affect the health of Aboriginal adults and children.’

Sadly nearly 40 years on, little has changed for remote Indigenous Australians. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders living in ‘discrete’ Indigenous communities still have the worst health outcomes of any population group in Australia.

One of the health problems plaguing remote Indigenous Australians is scabies; a contagious skin condition caused by a mite, which burrows under the skin causing irritation, rashes, severe itchiness, and infected sores. The resulting persistent bacterial infection from infected sores can expose sufferers to the risk of rheumatic heart disease, chronic illness, and early death.

In mainstream Australia, scabies is not a serious health problem and is treated relatively easily by applying a scabicide cream and washing clothes and bed linen in hot water. However,

in remote Indigenous communities, where up to 20 people may share a three-bedroom house and hot water is not always available, maintaining good personal hygiene is hard, if not impossible.

Enter Dr Sam Prince and the program he established One Disease at a Time, which aims to eliminate one disease at a time in Australia, starting with scabies. Says Dr Prince, ‘If I identify a problem, I feel as a private citizen that I should get together with others and do something, not complain to the government.’

Dr Prince has achieved more in 27 years than most people achieve in a lifetime. Academically gifted, he was accepted into medical school when he was only 16. A year before he graduated from medical school, he established Zambrero, the first in a chain of healthy Mexican restaurants. Using the profits from these restaurants, Dr Prince established E-magine, a philanthropic foundation with the goal of providing information technology to

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rural and remote areas in developing nations.

Dr Prince takes pains to emphasise that One Disease at a Time is not a one-man band. He may be the vision behind the program but he is certainly not acting alone. The philosophy underpinning the program is that although great challenges exist, if good people get together and focus on a goal, then any outcome is possible.

With that in mind, Dr Prince has selected some of the most experienced and talented practitioners he could find to lead the project. The program emphasises engaging with communities and encouraging local participation and capacity building.

The advent of the drug Ivermectin has made the successful eradication of scabies in East Arnhem Land more feasible. Instead of the cumbersome practice of daily total-body applications of scabicide cream, one pill kills the scabies mite.

An Ivermectin mass drug administration program has already started in East Arnhem Land. Approximately 1,200 people were screened and treated in the first rollout of the drug in April 2010, followed by a targeted screening and treatment program in October 2010. In the second rollout in April 2011 for all the residents of Galiwin'ku, local community members were employed to administer the drug and are now undergoing training in child health research.

Central to the program's success is a social marketing campaign to de-normalise the presence of scabies and skin infections in children and to improve environmental health and hygiene practices. The stereotype of the snotty-nosed and crusty sore afflicted Aboriginal child has meant that what is not tolerated in non-Indigenous children is often viewed as normal for Indigenous children.

Tess Lea, in her book *Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts: Indigenous Health in Northern Australia*, argues that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in remote

communities are so used to being sick they do not know what it is to feel well. On a visit to a remote community in East Arnhem Land, I observed children running around, looking very energetic and full of life as most kids do. While some had runny noses and sores on their legs, there were no noticeable signs of anything seriously wrong. However, a nurse in the community told me that although the children looked healthy, quite a few had serious health problems.

Looking past the seemingly innocuous sores on legs to the serious underlying health conditions they represent is vital for any improvements in Indigenous child health outcomes. In some communities in the Northern Territory, seven out of every 10 children have scabies at least once before their first birthday. One Disease at a Time aims to ensure that by 2013, children born in the East Arnhem Land region do not grow up believing that it is normal to suffer from scabies.

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Although this may seem like an insurmountable task, Dr Prince is optimistic that they can do it.

Alongside the social marketing campaign to de-normalise scabies and skin infections in children, the program will contain a health and hygiene component to address environmental factors. Dr Prince is confident that by combining on-the-ground support and expertise in proven medical models delivered by experienced project managers the program will achieve success. He strongly believes that: 'If the will was behind solutions rather than focusing on the problems, there would be a significant win.'

One of his other aims in starting the project was to imbue a sense of optimism among health professionals about Indigenous health. Listening to a group of first-year medical students discussing Aboriginal health, Dr Prince was dismayed at their pessimistic attitude. He hopes that by successfully eradicating scabies in East Arnhem Land, he may inspire others to work in Indigenous health, and that in time, medical students will come to see Aboriginal health as an area worth dedicating their life (or part of it) to—and not as a lost cause.

Hearing Dr Prince talk I could not help feeling inspired. If more people believed that change was possible and acted to make it happen there might actually be improvements in Indigenous health outcomes. That maybe in another forty years we wouldn't be reading about the woeful state of Indigenous health anymore.

To bring home his point, Dr Prince quotes an entreaty attributed to Goethe: 'Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic.'

BIG IDEAS FORUM 2011

You Can't Say That: Freedom of Speech & the Invisible Muzzle

The theme for this year's CIS Big Ideas Forum is political correctness and its insidious march into the lives of Westerners. Ostensibly a tool of civility and respect, it is often, on closer inspection, a way of silencing unpopular opinion, and is a serious threat to freedom of speech.

Join **Dr Janet Albrechtsen**, columnist at *The Australian*; **Professor James Allan** bills-of-rights scholar; and **Brendan O'Neill**, pulls-no-punches journalist and editor of *spiked*, the popular online UK publication, for a look into the pervasive problem of political correctness.

Monday, 1 August 2011

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66 Goulburn Street, Sydney 2000

5:45pm for 6:00pm start. Please assist us by taking your seat on time.

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