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AHCWA chair Vicki O'Donnell: poverty to blame for Diphtheria outbreak

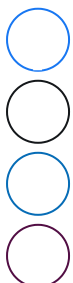


Cain Andrews The Kimberley Echo
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Cain Andrews



Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service chief executive Vicki O'Donnell. Credit: Supplied: KAMS/RegionalHUB



Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia chair Vicki O'Donnell has blamed the ongoing diphtheria outbreak across the Kimberley and Pilbara on the State Government's lack of long-term environmental health investment.

The potentially fatal disease which had not been seen in regional WA for more than half a century until earlier this year first started in the Northern Territory in late 2025 before moving west to the Kimberley and Pilbara.

This year, there have been 230 recorded cases of diphtheria in the country with 125 cases recorded in WA – 100 in the Kimberley, 22 in the Pilbara, two in the Goldfields and one in Perth.

According to AHCWA, the outbreak is disproportionately impacting Aboriginal people with more than 94 per cent of cases occurring among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

While vaccination remains a critical tool for preventing severe illness and death from the disease, Ms O'Donnell said addressing the underlying structural drivers of ill health would stop the spread and help prevent further outbreaks.

“To reduce rates of disease we need parity in community infrastructure, essential services and living conditions including housing, water, sewerage and waste management,” she said.

Two-thirds of these cases present as cutaneous diphtheria, where bacteria spread through direct contact with infected wounds and sores.

Ms O'Donnell said existing skin infections – often caused by group A streptococcus – are already primary drivers of acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease.

“It is unacceptable that our people continue to suffer from ARF and RHD, diseases that are entirely preventable through improved living conditions,” she said.

The AHCWA said the outbreak was being driven by crowded conditions and limited access to showers, clean clothes and bedding.

“The solution to curbing the current spread and preventing future outbreaks lies in the Aboriginal Environmental Health Model of Care,” they said.

“The model is built on six core domains, including Healthy Homes, which ensures that essential ‘health hardware’ – such as functioning showers, laundry facilities, and wastewater removal systems—are routinely assessed, maintained, and repaired.”

The State Government was contacted for comment.

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