

Diphtheria link raised

CAIN ANDREWS

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

The outbreak of the potentially fatal disease, which had not been seen in regional WA for more than half a century until earlier this year, started in the Northern Territory in late 2025 before moving 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 affecting 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.

"To reduce rates of disease we need parity in community infrastructure, essential services and living conditions including housing, water, sewerage and waste



Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service chief executive Vicki O'Donnell. Picture: KAMS

management," she said. Two-thirds of these cases present as cutaneous diphtheria, where bacteria spread through direct contact with infected wounds.

Ms O'Donnell said existing skin infections — often caused by group A streptococcus — were 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," it 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.

Trailblazer in health on honours list

CAIN ANDREWS

Local trailblazer and Walman Yawuru elder Elsta Foy has been recognised in the King's Birthday Honours List, receiving one of Australia's highest awards — the Medal of the Order of Australia — for a lifetime of advocacy and service to the Broome community.

A pioneer for Aboriginal health, Ms Foy was the first Aboriginal health worker trained in WA.

She worked for the Health Department for nearly 40 years, helping to establish Broome's first Aboriginal-controlled health service, the Broome Regional Aboriginal Medical Service, and founding Broome's rehabilitation centre, Milliya Rumurra.

Beyond her work in health, Ms Foy broke down social barriers in sport, becoming a founding member of the Broome Golf Club, helping to ensure Aboriginal inclusion before going on to be women's club champion for 19 consecutive years.

Later in life, Ms Foy became the first Aboriginal female shire councillor in Broome in 1990 where she championed Aboriginal rights and gender equality for 33 years, until 2023. She was also a finalist for the Wesfarmers Aboriginal award category in the 2024 Western Australian of the Year Awards.

Now 89 years old, Ms Foy said she was happy to be recognised for her 70 years of health sector work.



DEMERSAL FISHING RECOVERY REFORMS
For future generations

Bag and size limits have changed.

To further support recovery of the demersal scalefish resource, recreational fishing rules for demersal scalefish have changed, with new bag and size limits in place from 1 June.

Search Fishing Futures WA

