

Health trailblazer is honoured

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.

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, Milliwa 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 and going on to be women's club champion for 19 consecutive years.

Later in life, Ms Foy made history as the first Aboriginal female shire councillor in Broome in 1990 where she championed Aboriginal rights and gender equality for 33 years, until 2023.



Elsta Foy OAM. Picture: CelebrateWA

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 and advocacy with the Order of Australia Medal.

"It was a great surprise to me that I've got it. I'm quite humble about it. Not everybody gets it. They must have thought I was special in some way," she said.

"I'd like to thank the community for all their support over the years because they're the ones that inspired me to do what I've done."

In a message for the youth who are navigating a world which she

described as "much harder" than the world previous generations faced, Ms Foy said to keep looking after each other and country.

"I'm glad I was born when I was born. I had a future. I enjoyed every bit of it. I knew where I was going," she said.

"That's something I tell the younger people — to keep looking after and fighting for country. If you don't look after your future, you're not going to have any."

Governor-General Sam Mostyn congratulated all recipients.

"Our honours system recognises outstanding people who contribute so much to Australia. In our communities, in workplaces and across the country, recipients have made an exceptional contribution to Australia," she said.

"Just like those honoured across the past 50 years, their service and achievement in the community and public service, industry and academia, science, the arts and sport help shape our nation."

"Every Australian, regardless of their gender, social, cultural or economic background should be able to look at the honours list and see themselves."

Health chief calls for infrastructure 'parity' to help stop diphtheria

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Aboriginal Health Council of WA 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 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,



Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service chief Vicki O'Donnell.

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 acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease, 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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