

Developing sustainable E (environmental health) practices in 'SAFE' - the commitment to eliminate trachoma in Australia

Matthew Lester, WA Health, Chicky Clements, Nirrumbuk Environmental Health, WA

Trachoma is a blinding eye infection spread between children by infected eye and nose secretions. Repeated episodes of infection cause increasing damage, which can lead to blindness. Trachoma is a condition which was prevalent in Australia 150 years ago, but has disappeared from most of our population through the provision of adequate housing and sanitation.

Trachoma remains endemic, however, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – in particular in remote communities. Australia is the only high-income nation to still have trachoma.

The National Trachoma Surveillance Control Reference Group (NTSCRG) is composed of jurisdictional representatives and medical experts, supported by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, who are committed to the elimination of trachoma as a public health issue in Australia by 2020 in line with World Health Organization intent. Australia follows the WHO 'SAFE' Strategy for trachoma elimination (Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness and Environmental health).

The past 10 years have focused on surgery (S) and antibiotic (A) administration, combined with a comprehensive screening process for children. This has resulted in a significant reduction in community numbers and populations with endemic trachoma in Australia; rates in children in endemic areas have fallen from 21% in 2008 to 4.6% in 2015. As the prevalence has been driven to historically low numbers, there is a recognised need for effective implementation and management of the 'F' and 'E' components (Facial cleanliness and Environmental health) to sustain trachoma elimination as a public health issue and prevent any resurgence.

Facial cleanliness and environmental health improvement are the focus for the NTSCRG to keep trachoma prevalence down in the future. Having access to soap and water and the associated 'health hardware' is crucial to ensuring people have the ability to wash hands and faces to prevent trachoma transmission. Instilling the understanding in communities that a child's dirty face is unacceptable because of the potential for trachoma transmission is an integral health promotion message ('health software').

Environmental health is the part of health that consistently engages with the water, sanitation and housing (WASH) sector in Australia. It is the part of health that is most able to influence the performance of this sector and to insist on minimum standards to apply to community infrastructure, operation and housing quality and maintenance. This influence varies by jurisdiction and region, but is based on ensuring public health standards manage environmental health risks in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The most effective environmental health intervention is that which is directed at the home environment and the conditions that support the ability of people to maintain hygiene and prevent illness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health programs support the Healthy Living Practices, the first of which is the ability of people (especially children) to wash safely in their home environment.

In the interests of meeting the validation requirements for elimination of trachoma as a public health issue in Australia and effectively preventing the resurgence of trachoma prevalence rates from their historically lowest point, a more concerted effort has been applied to environmental health activities in the form of the Safe Bathrooms program.

Safe Bathrooms, as the name suggests, is a process of assessing bathrooms to determine their capacity to allow people to wash safely. This program is being introduced in 'at-risk' remote communities where trachoma has been identified with a recent prevalence.

This program has started in WA and will be run to see what difference it can make in sustainably reducing prevalence rates of trachoma in WA communities. There are 41 at-risk communities in WA, and the Safe Bathrooms program will be offered in each of these.

There are two recent developments in WA which will be tied in with the Safe Bathrooms project and augment what this might do:

1. There is a program already up and running in communities, called Squeaky Clean Kids. This is a widespread program across the four outback health regions which offers soap and soap dispensers to schools, and soap and soap containers to households.
2. Plumbing regulatory changes – a recent change to plumbing law in WA allows environmental health workers to attend to basic plumbing repairs in remote Aboriginal communities.

The Safe Bathrooms checklist was developed from an NT Housing form which numbered each item on a drawing. Using a range of assessment processes, a checklist was developed that reflected what is looked at and what can influence the integrity of a Safe Bathroom.

Basically, the assessor works through the checklist, which has individual health hardware diagrams against each item. Each bathroom component is checked against the list and, where it is found to be missing or faulty, is repaired on the spot (where that person has the ability and capacity to do the job) or referred to the housing maintenance agency. At the time of the assessment, if it is determined that there is a health software need (health promotion), then this is offered similarly either directly by the environmental health worker (with the right knowledge and training) or referred to the community health service.

WA Health is keeping a record of all assessments and the program aims to deliver these in a repeated manner. The Housing Authority in WA has been approached and has written a letter of support for the program to all environmental health service providers. The effect of this letter is strong – it validates the purpose of the program, it recognises the important role of environmental health workers in communities, welcomes their participation and provides an additional audit for the house maintenance program.

It's early days yet, but the whole program's rollout is possible only because environmental health workers see it as important, the communities recognise the benefits and there is the start of a fundamental shift in finally addressing the E component of SAFE, instead of tepid academic support and an expectation that someone else is doing this.

Elimination of trachoma in Australia will be achieved through the concerted efforts of screening and mass drug administration. It will only be sustainably eliminated with the appropriate environmental health measures in place - those measures that actively support the Healthy Living Practices with suitable functioning health hardware and the understanding of all people of their importance in keeping people healthy and protected.

For more information

Matthew Lester
Manager, Science And Policy
Environmental Health Directorate, Department Of Health
PO Box 8172, Perth Business Centre, WA 6849
Email: EHD.PA@health.wa.gov.au

Glossary

NTSCRG National Trachoma Surveillance Control Reference Group
SAFE Surgery, antibiotics, facial cleanliness, environmental improvement
WASH water, sanitation and housing
WHO World Health Organization