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MEDIA RELEASE

Lyme Disease in Australia

There is a hidden epidemic of Lyme disease occurring in Australia for which the Australian medical system is totally unprepared. Many health professionals, inexperienced in diagnosing and treating this complex and insidious disease, contribute to the unnecessary suffering, and on occasions, death, of Australians because of the environment of denial, that pervades the healthcare system.

Lyme disease is an extraordinarily complex disease, in particular because the *Borrelia* bacteria behave like stealth invaders changing form and disguising itself to avoid detection by the human immune system. Poor understanding of the complex array of symptoms with which Lyme disease presents and a lack of education and guidance from public health administration has resulted in many Lyme disease patients being misdiagnosed or undiagnosed and therefore untreated. The average time for a positive diagnosis of Lyme disease in Australia is 6.5 years. The consequential delays in treatment result in accumulated debilitation and the onset of chronic Lyme disease.

In America, Lyme disease was found in 7 out of 10 patients tested that had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, Motor Neurone, Parkinson and Alzheimer's disease. Whilst treatment at early onset could have reversed the symptoms and allowed patients and their families to return to their productive lives, lack of treatment results in physical, mental and financial devastation.

In 2012, the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Baggoley established a Clinical Advisory Committee (CACLD) to examine the prevalence of Lyme disease in Australia. The committee was dissolved in July 2014 with Professor Baggoley issuing a formal advisory notice recommending to Australian clinicians that they not rule out the possibility of a Lyme disease diagnosis. He also published a consolidated list of research priorities that would assist in clarifying the Australian Lyme disease-like syndrome; to date little has been progressed.

The question as to whether Lyme disease does or does not exist in Australia cannot be scientifically answered until research funding is committed to investigating the evidence. The No-Lyme disease case relies on a 1994 study, which failed to identify *Borrelia* spirochetes in the saliva of Australian ticks. More recent studies, however, have found presence of *Borrelia* and other Lyme co-infection bacteria carried by kangaroo ticks and other insects. Unique Australian forms of *Borrelia* have also been identified in Queensland and other areas throughout Australia, yet these findings are systematically disregarded without explanation.

If infection rates here in Australia continue to be ignored it may give rise to a potential epidemic of Lyme disease, as currently experienced in the USA. In America, recent statistics found that people suffering Lyme disease greatly outnumber those suffering from HIV AIDS and breast cancer put together.

Figures in Australia show that confirmed Lyme disease cases have risen abruptly as greater awareness of the disease emerges. A survey by the Lyme Disease Association of Australia received 300 responses from Lyme patients in Australia in 2012, which grew to over 1,000 in 2014 and continues at a rate of 800 new cases per month. A poll on A Current Affair in April 2015 has had in excess of 3,000 responses from people claiming to know someone suffering from Lyme disease.

LDAA welcomes the ACT Health Minister Simon Corbell's recent statement in relation to Lyme disease that doctor's must use their best clinical judgement as to the cause of any illness and act accordingly.

President of the Lyme Disease Association of Australia, Ms Sharon Whiteman encourages the early medical diagnosis and treatment of this disease as an important tool to counter the looming epidemic. "Patients who have been lucky enough to find a doctor to diagnose and treat Lyme disease are already getting better and some have been able to resume normal lives and contribute to society again," she said. "This disease is entirely preventable and it requires an immediate public health response, firstly to support those who are already sick and to prevent more cases," Ms Whiteman said.

It is time to recognise Lyme in Australia.

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The May Lyme Project event locations can be found via www.lymedisease.org.au/events while a full media kit can be obtained from the Lyme Disease Association of Australia's website www.lymedisease.org.au/media.



Someone You Know Has Lyme Disease

Lyme Disease Association of Australia | www.lymedisease.org.au
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