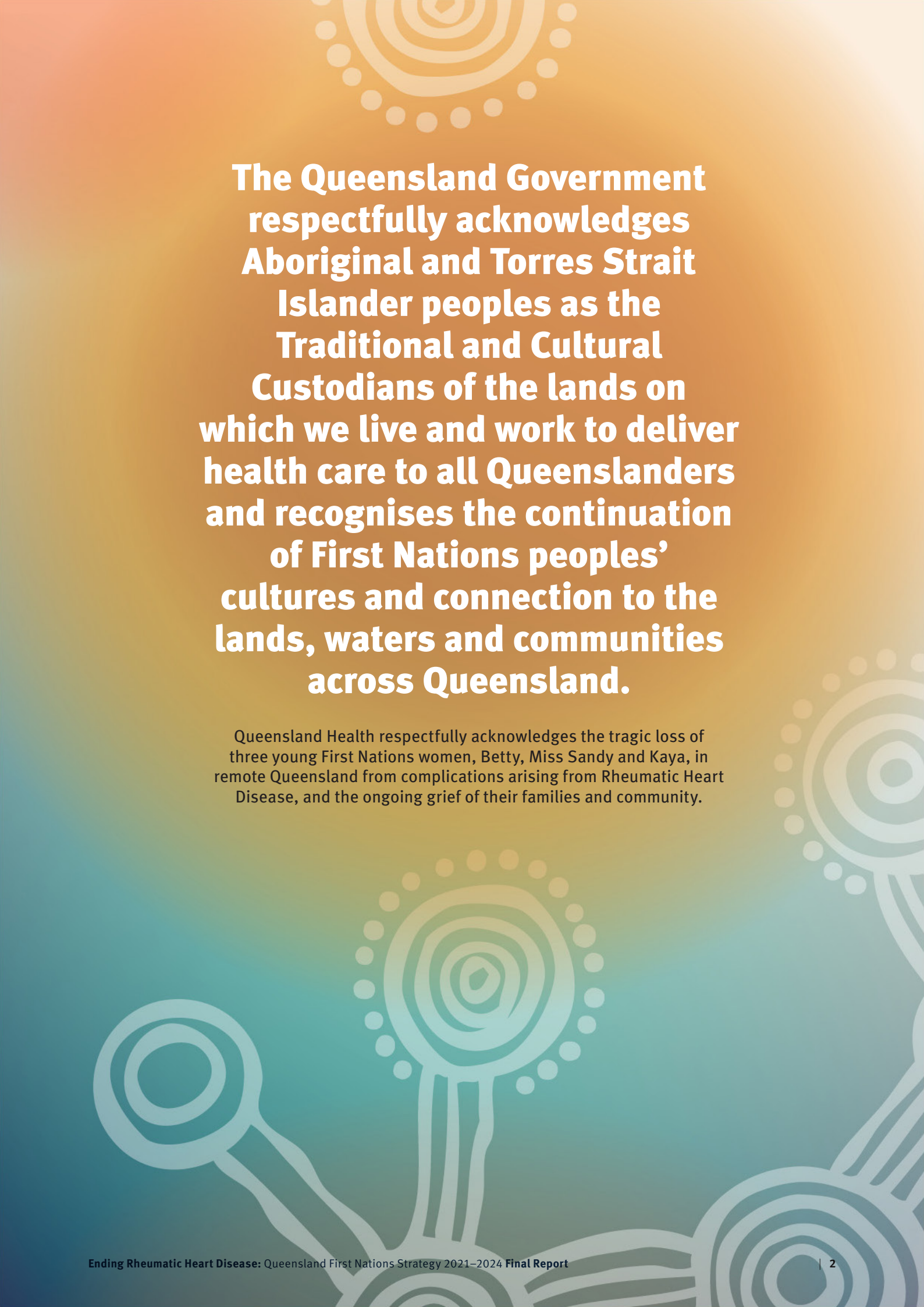


**Ending Rheumatic
Heart Disease:
Queensland First
Nations Strategy
2021–2024**

FINAL REPORT



Queensland
Government



The Queensland Government respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional and Cultural Custodians of the lands on which we live and work to deliver health care to all Queenslanders and recognises the continuation of First Nations peoples' cultures and connection to the lands, waters and communities across Queensland.

Queensland Health respectfully acknowledges the tragic loss of three young First Nations women, Betty, Miss Sandy and Kaya, in remote Queensland from complications arising from Rheumatic Heart Disease, and the ongoing grief of their families and community.

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Overview

This report provides an update not only on the achievements and activities directly funded by the strategy investment, but the breadth of work being undertaken by other government agencies and non-government partners in Queensland.



Students at Yarrabah State School

In March 2022, the Queensland Minister for Health and Ambulance Services released the **Ending Rheumatic Heart Disease: Queensland First Nations Strategy 2021-2024** (the strategy) dedicated to reducing the impact of acute rheumatic fever (ARF) and rheumatic heart disease (RHD) in Queensland.

The strategy was developed in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Health Sector and through broad stakeholder consultation.

The strategy builds on the state's first **Action Plan 2018–2021** to address ARF and RHD and is informed by Queensland's experience to date.

The strategy aligns to the evidence-based **RHD Endgame Strategy**, the blueprint to eliminate RHD in Australia by 2031, with five key priority areas:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership
- Community-based programs
- Healthy environments
- Early prevention
- Care and support.

The Queensland Government committed \$4.5 million over three years (2021–2024) to implement the strategy. A further \$2.88 million was committed over one year to strengthen prevention activities in communities where First Nations peoples are at the greatest risk of ARF and RHD.

Implementation of the strategy was supported by the development and implementation of state-wide and regional plans (Torres and Cape, Cairns and Hinterland, North West and Townsville) and was overseen by the RHD Executive Management Committee and regional working groups.

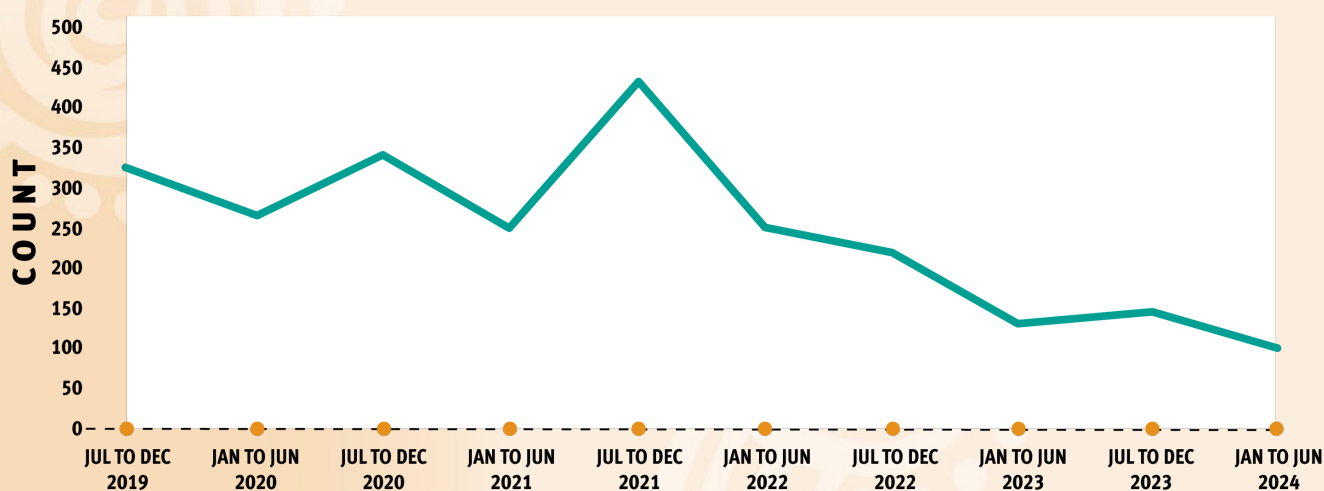
Key achievements under the strategy

- Increase in permanent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Environmental Health workforce positions across Cairns and Hinterland, Townsville, North West and Torres and Cape regions to support local primordial, primary and secondary prevention efforts.
- RHD care coordination workforce made permanent to support the long term management of ARF and RHD patients including pathways between primary, secondary and tertiary services.
- Development and implementation of regional ARF and RHD plans for Cairns and Hinterland, Townsville, North West and Torres and Cape regions to address local priorities.
- Commencement of co-designed, localised and culturally relevant prevention and engagement campaigns linking public facing information with health workforce education.
- Pilot of the Queensland Healthy Housing program in two remote discrete communities to improve the living environment in social housing through proactive repair and maintenance of health hardware and health promotion activities.
- Establishment of partnerships to sustain and expand access to free laundry facilities in remote First Nations communities that support healthy living practices and local employment opportunities. A new service commenced in Doomadgee in October 2023.
- Commencement of skin health programs in high priority communities including outreach skin assessments and health promotion to support early detection, treatment and management of skin conditions.
- Development and launch of an education framework to support the delivery of education and training to the health workforce in the prevention, treatment and management of ARF and RHD in Queensland.
- Ongoing success with the Happy Heart Clinic, increasing secondary prophylaxis rates in the Cairns region, building an empowered group of health consumers and sharing learnings with health services.
- Optimisation of adult RHD patient attendance at specialist outpatient and outreach clinics within the Cairns and Hinterland region with phone reminders and transport support, RHD nurse navigation service for complex patients and RHD clinical nurse consultant attendance at high-burden outreach clinics to improve care coordination and strengthening partnerships with primary health teams.
- Commencement of the Townsville Hospital and Health Service (HHS) ARF and RHD programs:
 - Nurse led model of care, working within a multi-disciplinary paediatric team to improve timely clinical outcomes for children, and adolescent and young adults (AYAs) facing or living with a ARF or RHD diagnosis. This holistic model of care developed by a dedicated RHD clinical nurse consultant aims to reduce barriers to healthcare for First Nations peoples while empowering children and their families to better understand and live with their RHD diagnosis.
 - Adolescent and Young Adult clinics supporting the transition from paediatric to adult cardiology services and improving consumer engagement with care and health outcomes.
 - Integrated adult RHD program providing specific RHD staff embedded and integrated in the region's existing networked cardiac services to provide a timely, patient-centric, coordinated, accountable and evidence-based outreach service across North West Queensland and Townsville regions.
- Commencement of the Queensland RHD Register platform rebuild and enhancement of information available on The Viewer to improve data linkage, timely information sharing and overall monitoring of disease burden (go live expected November 2024).

The Queensland Health Rheumatic Heart Disease Program is at the forefront of efforts to eradicate the disease, focusing on prevention, early detection and treatment.

Community-led initiatives and collaborations with community services are key to addressing RHD in Queensland, particularly in remote and First Nations communities.

COUNT OF RHD IN QLD BETWEEN JULY 2019 TO JUNE 2024



Overall, RHD cases in Queensland have shown a downward trend since mid-2021, declining significantly in the past year, with a 30% decrease in 2023–24 compared to the previous year (247 cases reported compared to 350 the previous year).

The decrease in RHD cases since 2021 has been evident across HHSs with the most dramatic reduction recorded in the Torres and Cape region, with a 63% decrease in RHD cases since 2022–23.

There were 6 RHD cases in Doomadgee in the financial year ending 30 June 2024, compared to 22 during the financial year ending 30 June 2022.

Across Queensland, the number of ARF cases also decreased by 7%, from 122 in 2022–23 to 113 in 2023–24.

Snapshots of activities shared by our government and non-government partners



Children at a CQHHS RHD Community Art Day at Biloela



Healthy Skin Healthy Heart program

Healthy Skin, Healthy Heart: Let's END RHD Together is an innovative and collaborative community-wide approach to respond to a public health crisis rolled out in partnership between Darling Downs HHS and community stakeholders.

The Healthy Skin, Health Heart public health response was rolled out in response to the observed rise of skin conditions and ARF notifications in a discrete First Nations community.

Darling Downs Public Health Unit, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health team and health professionals from the Sunshine Coast, Brisbane and Toowoomba worked collaboratively on this program with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers taking the lead in community care and engagement.

Since March 2023, the team have completed 1,255 skin checks (including concurrent treatment) and 300 echocardiogram screenings for RHD in the South Burnett region. The success of the program was formally recognised and received the award for Excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healthcare at the 2023 National Rural and Remote Health Awards held at Parliament House in Canberra. This award recognises teams and/or individuals from all peoples, natures, and cultures, who deliver exceptional healthcare services that are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

► **Community video:**
Healthy Skin, Healthy Heart ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com))

► **Program video (directed at health workforce):**
SC2300350 - Healthy Skin, Healthy Heart
3mins 30sec edit (v1) on Vimeo



Orange Sky Australia partnering with remote communities

Partnerships bringing laundry facilities to remote communities across Queensland

Orange Sky Australia provides access to laundry facilities for First Nations peoples where access to health hardware may be limited and / or cost prohibitive. Orange Sky works alongside remote communities to build impact through free laundry facilities, local employment opportunities, local partnerships with community controlled or led organisations and by providing a place for connection and conversation.

Orange Sky has partnered with remote Queensland communities to provide services in Palm Island, Yarrabah, Lockhart River, Aurukun and Doomadgee.

- In 2023, Orange Sky partnered with Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council, North West HHS and the community to establish a new service in Doomadgee.
- In March 2024, Orange Sky partnered with local stakeholders and community groups in Mt Isa to support a public health response and engage with community on a future service to support community health and wellbeing.
 - Number of shifts: 27
 - Number of sites: 6
 - Number of washes: 249
 - ~3700 kilograms of washing done

Following positive feedback and impactful engagement during the public health response, a service delivery partnership was established for the service to remain in Mount Isa.



Strong Start Healthy Heart - Ending RHD in the Torres and Cape

The Torres and Cape HHS geographical region is a vibrant landscape of 35 distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, each with its own rich culture and traditions. Recognising this diversity, the HHS progressed a personalised approach to tackling RHD and recruited four dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers (health workers) to act as case managers, embedded directly within communities.

This personalised approach is having impact in communities like **Badu, Bamaga, Northern Peninsula Area, Hope Vale** and **Thursday Island**. RHD clients are getting the comprehensive support they need locally: navigating services, receiving treatment and diagnoses, and most importantly, understanding their condition. This tailored approach recognises English is

often a second or sometimes third language for many residents. Local health workers bridge that gap, building trust, understanding concerns and addressing any barriers. Strong results have been seen with increased uptake of preventive medication, improved treatment adherence, timely echocardiograms and fewer missed specialist appointments.

Embedded within the primary healthcare team, the health workers champion a whole-of-community approach to health promotion and prevention activities. Collaborating with local environmental health workers to promote healthy living practices, they also work with local schools and various stakeholders to educate the community on the importance of treating skin sores and sore throats to prevent ARF and RHD.

Facing high cleaning product costs, the Badu health worker didn't miss a beat. Partnering with the Healthy Housing Pilot Program, they worked with local environmental health workers to deliver workshops teaching residents how to make their own cleaning solutions from household items.

In Bamaga, the health worker got creative by engaging the local primary school students with a fun and informative role-play activity featuring characters dressed as germs. This interactive approach demonstrated how bacteria can spread and highlighted the importance of good hygiene to prevent infection. It was a success! Around 30 children visited the primary healthcare centre after school for check-ups on minor cuts, wounds, and sores.

Thursday Island adopted a different approach with a health promotion stall at the local shop. This casual space fostered “yarning” (chatting) about RHD, its causes, and the importance of early presentation for those with sore throats and skin sores. This initiative helped build understanding within the community.

In Hope Vale skin health checks are conducted every Tuesday at the Hope Vale state school with the child health nurse and health worker checking skin for sores and looking for any sore throats for testing and treating.

Taking a tailored and personal approach to RHD prevention and management has demonstrated a real improvement since the program's launch. With only five notified cases of RHD in the six months to June 30, 2024, compared to 15 in the same period in 2023, 14 in 2022, and 17 in 2021, the results are encouraging.

This success has led the HHS to further expand its efforts. The health service is recruiting RHD champions in each primary healthcare centre and investing in a skin health initiative in four other communities. This comprehensive approach aims to prevent future cases of ARF/RHD, safeguarding the health of the Torres and Cape communities.



“ Strong results have been seen with increased uptake of preventive medication, improved treatment adherence, timely echocardiograms and fewer missed specialist appointments.



Toddler at a ILOL event in Yarrabah

“Love the Skin You’re In” and the “Yarrabah Soap Program”

Healthy Living Practices (HLPs) are actions people can take in the home to reduce the risks of acquiring infectious and chronic diseases. However, for these practices to be effective they must become habitual routine practises of daily life within the home. The Yarrabah Soap Program and the Love the Skin You’re In program, aim to support these HLPs and provide opportunity for these actions to become habits.

Love the Skin You’re In

Love the Skin You’re In is a program developed by the Gurriny Public Health Unit, which provides a series of HLP lessons for children in Yarrabah. This program has been developed in alignment with the nine HLPs, identified and developed by

the South Australian Nganampa Health Council in the 1980s, as what people need to prioritise in order to live healthy lives within their homes.

This program seeks to strengthen and support the work and messaging that is currently being covered by the Healthy Housing Program running in community, whilst also helping to consolidate and engrain the intentions of the Yarrabah Soap Program within the population.

Love The Skin You’re In, takes an asset-building approach, recognising and building upon the strengths, gifts, talents and resources of individuals and community. Lessons are highly interactive, incorporate room for healthy discussion and are created to fit the Yarrabah community context. They are designed to be delivered on a regular basis, facilitating positive behaviour change

and healthy habit formulation, with partnering organisations at locations around community.

Lessons from this program are being delivered every week and proving to be very popular, enjoyable and effective at embedding important health messaging, education, knowledge and skill within the children who attend.

By aiming to strengthen existing programs within community and investing in program design and implementation of programs that seek to habitualise HLPs, we have been able to develop and deliver a sustainable and scalable, person and community centric solution guided by evidence-based approaches.

Yarrabah Soap Program

The Yarrabah Soap program is a community-based initiative, which aims to support Yarrabah community members to reduce their risk of acquiring Strep A infections and other health issues, including gastrointestinal disease and respiratory tract infections. This program ensures that products which promote the attainment of healthy and strong skin are readily available throughout the Yarrabah community.

‘Washing People’, is one of the nine HLPs identified by the Nganampa Health Council. The Yarrabah Soap Program offers community members an opportunity to obtain and enjoy personal hygiene, skin and hair care products, easily, frequently and sustainably. It is an initiative, which seeks to enable community members to wash with soap and care for their skin and hair more frequently, thus enabling positive behaviour change and reduced risk of acquiring infections; including Strep A.

By partnering with MooGoo, an Australian made and owned skin care company, the program has been able to develop and deliver a sustainable and scalable, person and community centric solution guided by evidence-based approaches.



Gurriny Yealamucka Registered Nurse
Public Health at public awareness event, Yarrabah

“ It is an initiative, which seeks to enable community members to wash with soap and care for their skin and hair more frequently, thus enabling positive behaviour change and reduced risk of acquiring infections



Mural artist and student at CQHHS RHD Community Art Day, Biloela

Prevention and engagement campaigns

Queensland Health's Strategic Communications Branch is delivering co-designed, localised and culturally relevant prevention and engagement campaigns in Queensland HHS regions and their respective First Nations communities with high prevalence of RHD.

This program of work follows a community-driven and strength-based approach to ARF and RHD prevention and messaging, working at a grass roots level to identify and support local needs. Each initiative is delivered in collaboration with the HHS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Health organisations, educational and sporting bodies, community organisations, and the Menzies School of Health and Research to integrate clinical education from clinical specialists to patient-facing community health workforce.



RHD campaign brochure

The program also leverages existing RHD governance, Aboriginal Health Councils, working groups, taskforces, and Public Health roles to communicate, consult and involve organisations in creating awareness and encourage participation in the program and the decision-making process.

Targeted engagement activities include:

Darling Downs HHS – Healthy Skin, Healthy Heart (January – July 2023)

Clinical engagement:

- 5 clinical education sessions delivered by Menzies School of Health Research across the regions: Goondiwindi, Toowoomba, Cherbourg, Murgon, Kingaroy
- 90 participants completed the training.

Localised community initiatives:

- Cherbourg skin Stories about yarning and promoting clean skin
- Community engagement at International Legends of League (ILOL) event Cherbourg.

Outcomes / achievements:

- Toowoomba – Healthy Skin, Healthy Heart skin health care project (screening)
- Winner National Rural and Remote Health Awards 2023.

Central Queensland HHS – Let’s End RHD Together (May 2023 – ongoing)

Clinical engagement:

- Four clinical education sessions delivered by Menzies School of Health Research across the region: Rockhampton, Biloela, Woorabinda and Emerald
- 34 participants completed the training.



RHD campaign brochure - detail.

Localised community initiatives:

- Two local First Nations Central Queensland artists engaged
- Suite of localised resources developed (video animations, voice-overs, posters, appointment cards, merchandise)
- Network of community health champions established
- Community engagement at International Legends of League (ILOL) events Rockhampton (November 2023) and Gladstone (April 2024).

Outcomes / achievements:

- Healthy Skin, Strong Heart RHD community artwork installations at Biloela and Woorabinda hospitals (July 2024)
- Biloela Hospital establishing an ARF/RHD clinic, removing it from the emergency department
- Partnership between Central Queensland HHS and Bidgerdii Community Health Service established.

▶ **Video: Lets end RHD together**

Healthy Housing Program in Yarrabah and Badu Island

Queensland Health and the Department of Housing, Local Government, Planning and Public Works continue to work together to pilot the Healthy Housing Program in Yarrabah and Badu Island to support improved health outcomes of First Nations peoples.

The program aims to reduce the prevalence of communicable diseases in households and communities, through timely housing maintenance, supported by focused advice on healthy living practices and delivery of environmental health services such as pest and animal treatments. The program achieves this by:

Better health for community – improving the ability of participants to practice healthy living in the home, leading to a reduction in the incidence and prevalence of infectious diseases.

Healthier homes – improved functionality of health hardware and reduction in environmental health risks within the home; and enhancements to housing systems to support health outcomes.

Capacity building – improving the health literacy of participating households and communities and strengthening the capacity of local services to support the health of program participants and the community.



The program aims to reduce the prevalence of communicable diseases in households and communities, through timely housing maintenance

Over the last 12 months, the program in Yarrabah:

- Inspected 143 houses supporting over 1200 participants
- Distributed 143 Household skin first-aid kits
- Distributed 143 MooGoo kits - shampoo, conditioner, lotion, milk wash, insect deterrent
- Undertook over 340 hours of tenant engagement promoting Healthy Living Practices
- Team contact hours over 720 hours tenant engagement inspections.

Over the last 12 months, the program on Badu Island:

- Inspected 51 properties supporting over 200 participants
- Undertook over 250 hours of in-home engagement promoting healthy living practices
- Provided skin first aid kits and education on RHD to 51 families
- Facilitated 11 occupational therapy assessments and reports
- Delivered 48 pest treatment and 18 animal management referrals
- Partnered with multiple agencies to support delivery of improved health hardware and environmental services within participant homes.



What's next?

While there have been areas of progress, there is a need for ongoing commitment to action for real and sustainable change.

On 29 May 2024, Queensland Health and Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council (QAIHC) co-hosted an RHD Forum in Brisbane to discuss key priority areas to inform actions for the next three years. The forum was attended by representatives from the Department of Health, QAIHC, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, HHS, Northern Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Alliance, Children's Health Queensland and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Health Organisations.

Using the key priorities from the RHD Endgame Strategy, a new action plan for 2024–2027 will be developed to continue the work of the time limited strategy for a coordinated whole of system approach and commitment from key government and non-government stakeholders across the state.

The Queensland Government has committed ongoing funding to support the development, coordination and implementation of the action plan for the prevention and management of ARF and RHD in Queensland.



Proud health care worker at Woorabinda

For more information:

Queensland Health Rheumatic Heart Disease Program

Email: qldrhdprogram@health.qld.gov.au

Webpage: [Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease | Queensland Health](#)

Watch

Moonshine Agency Film Release:

Take Heart: Happy Heart – a journey to an RHD free future in Queensland and Torres Strait Islands

▶ **Video: Take Heart: Happy Heart on Vimeo**