

MEDIA RELEASE

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Large Australian Study could end deadly TB epidemic

Tuberculosis (TB) kills more people each year than any other infectious disease and has been identified as a global 'epidemic' by the World Health Organisation because a solution stop the spread of this disease has been out of reach, until now. A group of Australian scientists have made a major breakthrough with a study published in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine, which could save thousands of lives.

Scientists, including Centenary Institute and Sydney University's Professor Warwick Britton, have found that proactively testing relatives of TB patients for the deadly disease will increase diagnosis rates and will save lives. A trial involving 35,000 people in 70 districts of Vietnam found household screening for tuberculosis saw 2.5 times as many people go on to receive life-saving treatments.

This collaborative study by researchers from the Centenary Institute and the Woolcock Institute, with the National TB Program in Vietnam, is so significant that it could finally see the World Health Organisation's goal to eradicate the disease by 2030, become a likely reality.

"Working within the National TB Program, the team conducted a randomised control trial over five years in 70 districts of Vietnam that proved this approach was effective at finding TB patients in the community. Prompt treatment of these patients reduces the spread of this highly contagious disease," says Professor Britton.

Australia's closest neighbours are most affected by TB, including Indonesia, China and the Philippines. The deadly infection is curable with medication, but patients in these regions are not being diagnosed early enough to recover and stop the spread of this devastating disease.

"A major barrier to controlling TB has been the *hidden 4 million*- TB patients who are not being detected and treated in countries with a high burden of TB," says Professor Britton.

The team of Australian researchers working with the National TB Program in Vietnam, urgently sought new practices which would boost diagnosis rates and curb the disease spread. Scientists tested the effectiveness of a program in which those living with a known TB patient, were actively screened for the disease over two years.

The study showed early detection and the resulting successful treatment of TB will reduce the spread of TB and the overall disease rate was reduced by a hugely significant 40 per cent in the districts which were screened. "The promising findings are likely to see a new approach to tackling TB implemented, reducing death and suffering around the globe," says Professor Britton. Further

research will now be undertaken to work out how to implement this life-saving process where it's needed.

The study was funded by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and The Centre of Research Excellence for TB control and is a collaboration between researchers at the Centenary Institute, the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research, University of Sydney and University of NSW and the National TB Program in Vietnam.

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