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PHA says forget the tax cuts, fix the housing crisis

The Public Health Association (PHA) says new research on rheumatic fever highlights a critical lack of action by central and local governments in providing adequate social housing.

The University of Otago study found Maori are 10 times more likely and Pacific people more than 20 times more likely to get rheumatic fever than other New Zealanders.

The National Executive Officer of the PHA, Dr Gay Keating, says acute rheumatic fever (ARF) is an infectious disease that thrives in overcrowded conditions.

"Instead of having to fund treatment of ARF, and down the track, expensive heart operations to repair the damage it does, governments would be better off adequately housing their populations to start with," says Dr Keating.

She says the situation is doubly tragic because most of the victims are children.

"While we are busy calculating exactly how much we will be able to buy with our tax cut of a few dollars a week, we should remember there are children getting sick and dying because there aren't enough houses for the number of people who live in New Zealand now.

"It should be of concern to all New Zealanders, and critically so to health officials, that there is such an enormous ethnic disparity in the cases of an infection that targets children living in cramped, poor quality surroundings," Dr Keating says.

"This new research shows yet again how important it is for the government to urgently address the crisis in the country's housing, to supply enough stock for low income families – particularly children – to live comfortably and more importantly, in good health."

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Note: Acute rheumatic fever (ARF) and the damage it does to the heart is the subject of recent research from the University of Otago's School of Medicine & Health Sciences in Wellington.

ARF is an autoimmune response to infection by a group of streptococcus bacteria. The acute illness affects the joints, central nervous system and skin and often causes lasting damage to the heart.

Its incidence among Maori and Pacific people grew so dramatically between 1996 and 2005 that, despite the number of cases falling in the group classified as "New Zealand European and other", the country's overall rate climbed. That rate is now one of the highest in the developed world.

Throughout most of the 1990s, there were more than 120 deaths per year from heart disease caused by rheumatic fever. Of the communicable diseases in New Zealand, only AIDS causes greater premature death for those aged under 65 years.

The incidence of rheumatic fever in New Zealand is intensely concentrated in the 5-14 year old age group and among Maori and Pacific people who live in the upper North Island.

The study concludes that ARF and the heart disease associated with it cost the country millions every year. Even as far back as the early 1990s, the annual cost to the Auckland Area Health Board alone was estimated at \$3.6 million.

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