


ABC Online**The World Today - Northern Territory moves to combat kidney disease**

[This is the print version of story <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/9233396.html>]

The World Today - Wednesday, 27 August, 2003 12:40:57

Reporter: Anne Barker

PETER CAVE: Kidney disease is sweeping like a plague through remote indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, with the rate of renal disease in many communities up to 10 times the national average. But now there's new hope for some of the hundreds of remote patients who are forced to leave home for dialysis.

As Anne Barker reports, health authorities are installing mobile dialysis machines in Aboriginal communities.

ANNE BARKER: Twenty-year-old Marcia Gondarra has been forced to live away from home and family since she was 12, because she needs access to a kidney dialysis machine. She comes from Elcho Island, a remote Aboriginal community in eastern Arnhem Land, where dialysis simply isn't available.

Four and a half hours a day for three days a week, Marcia Gondarra hooks herself up to a machine in Darwin, and without it she'd die.

MARCIA GONDARRA: I started dialysing when I was 12 and it's very hard, especially when you come from remote community and you don't know people here in Darwin.

ANNE BARKER: Marcia Gondarra is one of several hundred Aboriginal renal patients in the Northern Territory who face certain death unless they leave their homes and families and move long distances for treatment.

Renal nurse, Barbara Ewens, who's taken Marcia Gondarra into her own home for the past eight years, says the disease is hugely disruptive to traditional community life.

BARBARA EWENS: You might lose a senior member of the family that's normally a great direction and guidance, and that person gets ill and has to come to town. In Marcia's case, she was the youngest Aboriginal to be receiving hemodialysis treatment, probably at that time in Australia.

ANNE BARKER: But a quiet revolution is taking place in the Northern Territory, where up to 85 per cent of all renal patients are Aboriginal.

The NT Government has begun installing small demountable clinics in remote communities, with portable dialysis machines for patients who can treat themselves without a nurse.

Health Minister, Jane Aagaard, says the first unit will open on Elcho Island later this year, and Marcia Gondarra will be the first patient in Arnhem Land to return home.

JANE AAGAARD: It's something that we absolutely have to tackle at both ends. We have to be able to assist in preventing this disease, but also assist when people are presenting with the acute stage.

ANNE BARKER: So do you see a day when everyone who's forced to live away from their communities might be able to return home?

JANE AAGAARD: The sad thing is that not everybody who's... has renal disease is actually able to have this kind of home-based hemodialysis. However, we're moving to having more dialysis centres in all of the major centres in the Northern Territory as well.

ANNE BARKER: The Northern Territory has by far the highest rate of renal disease in Australia. And pockets of the NT's Aboriginal population have the highest rates in the world.

Dr Paul Snelling says socio-economic factors, like poor housing and malnutrition, are largely to blame.

PAUL SNELLING: Seventy-five per cent of the renal diseases explained by those socio-economic factors, now they obviously tie into biomedical things, like recurrent infections, poor maternal foetal health, poor housing and recurrent infections, and we can medically look at trying to improve those, but I think it's the overwhelming social disadvantages is really the driving force.

ANNE BARKER: For Marcia Gondarra, the opening of a clinic on Elcho Island is the best news in 10 years. But for Barbara Ewens, the good news comes tinged with sadness.

BARBARA EWENS: I don't want to think about it, I get too upset.

ANNE BARKER: So how much will you miss her?

BARBARA EWENS: Oh, you can't put a quantity on that, can you? I'll run up a big phone bill, and probably go flying over there from time to time, yes.

PETER CAVE: Barbara Ewens, a renal nurse in Darwin. She was speaking to our Reporter, Anne Barker.

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