

Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Budget Estimates 2017 - 2018, 26 May 2017

Ref No: SQ17-000510

OUTCOME: 2 - Health Access and Support Services

Topic: Syphilis Outbreak

Type of Question: Hansard Page 56

Senator: McCarthy, Malrindirri

Question:

Ms Appleyard: Yes, I can confirm that there is an ongoing outbreak in the north of Australia, and also in South Australia. We are talking about Queensland, Northern Territory, the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the north of South Australia. A multijurisdictional outbreak investigation group has been established, and that meets monthly to investigate the outbreak and to keep across the surveillance numbers—to know what numbers we are dealing with.

Senator McCARTHY: Where is it located?

Ms Appleyard: I can actually give you the specific areas, the outbreak areas, if you wouldn't mind just bearing with me.

Senator McCARTHY: Yes, if you can give the outbreak areas and also this task force?

Ms Appleyard: Oh, yes, the Multijurisdictional Syphilis Outbreak Working Group is coordinated by my division of the Department of Health, the Office of Health Protection.

Senator McCARTHY: And where are they located?

Ms Appleyard: We are located in Canberra, but of course there are representatives located in states and territories, because it is the Commonwealth doing national coordination of state and territory activity.

Senator McCARTHY: And when was that group put together?

Ms Appleyard: In 2014, and, as I mentioned, it meets monthly.

Senator McCARTHY: So how long has the department been aware of this outbreak?

Ms Appleyard: The first indications of the outbreak commencement were in January 2011, but I would say at that stage—and I might have to take it on notice—it may not have been identified as an outbreak per se. That is generally something that you will pick up after it has been going on for a while and where you can link the cases in accordance with the case definition.

Answer:Areas currently affected by the infectious syphilis outbreak**Queensland**

- North West Hospital and Health Service area (from 1 January 2011);
- Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Service area (from 1 December 2012);
- Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service area (from 1 August 2013);
- Townsville Hospital and Health Service area (from 1 January 2014).

Northern Territory (as at 1 January 2017, all regions in the Northern Territory have been declared outbreak regions)

- Alice Springs or Barkly district (from 1 July 2013);
- Katherine district (from 1 May 2014);
- East Arnhem district (from 1 November 2015);
- Darwin Rural and Urban (from 1 January 2017).

Western Australia

- Kimberley region (from 1 June 2014).

South Australia

- Far North, Western and Eyre regions (from 15 November 2016).

Outbreak commencement

Through routine surveillance work undertaken by the Office of Health Protection, the Department of Health has been closely monitoring increases in infectious syphilis notifications in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people since 2011.

Mechanisms to link infectious syphilis cases to a broader outbreak across jurisdictional borders was formalised in April 2015, through the formation of the Multijurisdictional Syphilis Outbreak Working Group.

Infectious syphilis cases retrospectively associated with the outbreak were first reported in the North West region of Queensland in 2011, with subsequent increases reported in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia in July 2013, June 2014 and November 2016 respectively, following sustained periods of low notification rates.