NT Aboriginal children: High levels of hearing loss linked to absenteeism

Aboriginal children in their first years of primary school in the Northern Territory are missing school because of high but largely preventable levels of hearing impairment.

In a world-first study investigating the association between hearing impairment (HI) and Year 1 school attendance in Aboriginal children in the NT, researchers found clear evidence that HI has a negative and independent impact on school attendance.

Aboriginal children with any level of hearing impairment will miss school more than their peers with normal hearing.

More than a third of children (36.3%) surveyed had bilateral hearing loss, and more than half (55.1%) had unilateral or bilateral hearing loss. The cause of hearing impairment in the vast majority of children is otitis media (middle-ear infection).

The findings are published today in the Public Health Association of Australia’s journal, the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*.

A team of researchers led by Jiunn-Yih Su with the Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research, Charles Darwin University, recommend better early detection for treatment and ensuring teaching staff are made aware and equipped to support students with hearing difficulties.

“The silent way in which HI presents in young Aboriginal students can make it difficult to detect, especially for teachers who may be unfamiliar with the children,” Su and his colleagues conclude.

“This, together with the high prevalence of otitis media from the first months of life, supports regular surveillance of the infection and hearing for all Aboriginal children living in remote communities. This should be provided during early childhood, when they are entering pre-school, and/or their first year of compulsory full-time education.”

School attendance remains a concern in the NT with average attendance rates falling the past decade, and stubbornly low rates among Aboriginal students in remote areas. The implications for children are poor educational outcomes and life prospects.

ENDS

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* Based on two sets of data, Remote Hearing Assessment data and individual-level health and education data.