

Prestigious international scholarship recognises the importance of skin health research

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Menzies School of Health Research PhD student, Dr Victoria Cox, has been awarded the prestigious 2024 Fulbright Northern Territory Scholarship to further her studies in skin health research over the next 12 months.

This will support Dr Cox to study as a visiting student researcher at Massachusetts General Hospital, the premier teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School, in Boston, Massachusetts. She will complete her PhD under the guidance of Associate Professor Esther Freeman, who is the Director of Global Health Dermatology at Harvard University/Massachusetts General Hospital.

The Fulbright Program is the United States of America's flagship foreign exchange scholarship program and is aimed at increasing research collaboration with other nations. The [Northern Territory \(NT\) Fulbright scholarship](#) is also made possible with support from Charles Darwin University and the Northern Territory Government.

Whilst undertaking her research program at Harvard, Dr Cox will work on the global access to dermatology project. Her work will be part of an international research program to investigate the provision of skin healthcare and create a roadmap to improve access to skin health services in low, middle and high-income countries across the world.

Involvement in this project has arisen from Dr Cox's locally focused PhD which looks at the prevalence and impact of scabies and common skin conditions in remote Aboriginal communities across the NT.

Scabies is a tropical skin disease caused by tiny mites that burrow into the skin and lay eggs. This causes itchiness and a rash, which can lead to skin sores and serious secondary complications including systemic bacterial infections, heart and kidney disease. This infectious skin disease is spread through direct skin-to-skin contact and is treated with creams and oral medication.

Scabies is classed as a neglected tropical disease (NTD) by the World Health Organization. It is one of the most prevalent NTDs across the world, with some of the highest rates seen in parts of northern Australia and in the Pacific.

Dr Cox has recently led a team to conduct the first formal skin prevalence survey in the NT in more than 10 years, as part of her PhD research program. Preliminary findings suggest that approximately 25 percent of residents in remote NT Aboriginal communities suffer from scabies. This demonstrates the strong need for evidenced-based research and healthcare policy to inform public health skin care programs in northern Australia.

In 2023, Dr Cox presented these preliminary findings at the World Health Organization First Global Meeting on Skin Neglected Tropical Diseases in Geneva at the WHO Headquarters, highlighting her passion and drive as a leader in this field.

As part of the Scholarship program, Dr Cox will share her research at the Fulbright Gala Presentation Dinner at Parliament House in Canberra, later this month, ahead of commencing her international studies.

Quotes attributable to Menzies' PhD student and Fulbright Scholarship recipient, [Dr Victoria Cox](#):

"Learning under the guidance of a leader in global health dermatology such as Prof Esther Freeman through the Fulbright Scholarship is an unparalleled opportunity for me, and I hope to contribute to international skin health research and consider how these learnings can be applied to a Northern Territory context.

"Through my research, I hope to be a part of helping to address the high burden of skin disease including scabies, so that in the future, no child in Australia experiences poor health outcomes from an infectious skin disease that is preventable and treatable.

"We need more local skin health leaders and champions to drive public health change, and I hope that this scholarship takes me a step towards my goal of being a public health leader in the Australia/Pacific region."

Quote attributable to Director of Global Health Dermatology at Harvard University/ Massachusetts General Hospital, A/Prof Esther Freeman:

"I am delighted that Dr. Cox will be able to join me in Boston supported by the Fulbright program. Her background in access to care for underserved populations in Australia is directly applicable to our global work on access to skin health, and we look forward to her joining this important research project."

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies is one of Australia's leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and a leader in global and tropical research into life-threatening illnesses. Menzies continues to translate research into effective partnerships and programs in communities across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.