

## 04 NEWS

# Saving lives of remote children

## JASON WALLS

DARWIN researchers have uncovered alarming rates of rheumatic heart disease in East Timorese children, sparking new lifesaving interventions back home.

The landmark study, led by the Menzies School of Health research and published today, revealed the rate of RHD in East Timor was among the highest in the world.

The research involved screening 1400 schoolchildren for the disease and found previously undiagnosed definite or borderline RHD in 3.5 per cent of children tested.

Study lead author and Menzies' honorary research fellow, Josh Francis, said the burden of RHD in East Timor was even greater than what is seen in high-risk Aboriginal communities in the Top End.

Similar studies in the NT have identified RHD in about 2.5 per cent of schoolchildren screened.

In response to the alarming findings, Dr Francis is now leading a follow-up screening program in East Timor and the NT called the Pedrino Study.

"Given the high burden of RHD we identified in East Timor, and the high burden of RHD in Northern Australia, we believe there is a role for further school-based echocar-

diography screening," Dr Francis said.

"But (there is) also a need to develop and validate a simpler, quicker, cheaper approach to active case finding.

"The Pedrino study involves further echo screening for RHD in East Timor and the NT, this time evaluating an abbreviated echo protocol using handheld Vscan echo machines operated by trained health workers, doctors and nurses from East Timor and the NT."

Dr Francis said so far more than 450 students from a remote Top End community had had echoes performed in the first of three weeks of screening for the Pedrino project.

He said new, previously undiagnosed cases of RHD were being detected "every day", including cases which will require cardiac surgery.

"All cases have commenced on life-saving penicillin injections, and linked to ongoing medical care," he said.

"The burden of RHD identified is even higher than we expected."

The Pedrino study will continue screening over the next two weeks, with a large team including Timorese and Aboriginal health workers who are now in East Timor, where a further 2000 students are expected to be checked for RHD.