Attn: All clinicians in Torres Strait and NPA
Re: Outbreak of infectious syphilis in Far North Queensland now established in the Torres Strait islands and Northern Peninsula Area.

The outbreak of syphilis in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people spread to the Torres Strait islands and NPA in 2017. Some cases in the Torres and NPA were diagnosed in people who had visited the Cairns region, but there have now been multiple locally-acquired cases. Since 2011 there have been eight cases of congenital syphilis associated with the outbreaks in North Queensland; six of these babies died. Gay men and men who have male sexual partners are also at increased risk.

- Syphilis is highly infectious in the first two years.
- Women who have not been treated can transmit to their unborn baby for up to eight years, resulting in congenital syphilis
- Syphilis increases the risk of HIV transmission.

- Offer sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing, including for syphilis and HIV, to all young people, especially Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people aged 15-40 anytime they attend health services. Offer testing to people in this age range who have travelled.
- Test all pregnant women for syphilis at first presentation. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women should also be tested at 28 weeks and at 34-36 weeks gestation. All women who have had syphilis treated during the pregnancy and/or limited antenatal care should be tested for syphilis at delivery.
- No newborn should leave hospital until their mother’s syphilis status is known or has been requested.
- Test all people diagnosed with another STI for syphilis and HIV
- For any genital ulcers, treat and test for syphilis immediately. DO NOT WAIT for a positive test result.
- Contact trace for everyone diagnosed with infectious syphilis, so that all their sexual partners can be tested and treated. Do not wait for a positive test result before treating contacts.
- Encourage condom use.

Infectious syphilis can present with or without symptoms.

Primary syphilis - may include one or more painful or painless ulcer/s (chancre/s), usually in the genital area. These spontaneously resolve in 3-6 weeks. Secondary syphilis - may include condylomata lata (raised flat-topped wart-like lesions), rash –especially on the body, palms and soles of feet, patchy hair loss, lymphadenopathy, fever and flu-like illness.

Treatment of Infectious Syphilis:
- Benzathine Penicillin 1.8g IMI stat, given as two doses of 900mg by deep IMI.

Further information and assistance with contact tracing:
- Queensland Syphilis Surveillance Service (‘Syphilis Register’) on 1800 032 238 or email North-Qld-Syphilis-Surveillance-Centre@health.qld.gov.au
- Men’s and Women’s Health Teams: Torres Strait 4069 0412 or NPA 4090 4235.

Dr Annie Preston-Thomas, Public Health Medical Officer- Sexual Health Team, Tropical Public Health Services (Cairns)