MEDIA RELEASE

More than ‘just another runny ear’

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The prevalence of ‘runny ears’ among Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) population is so great that doctors may be failing to consider more serious and fatal conditions such as cholesteatoma.

An ear with chronic suppuratives otitis media, sometimes referred to as ‘runny ears’ describes a burst ear drum which allows fluid to enter the ear canal, causing difficulty in hearing.

Ear, Nose and Throat Surgery Service Registrar, Dr Nayellin Reyes-Chicuellar, of the Royal Darwin Hospital is urging all medical practitioners involved in ear health to increase the clinical suspicion in every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patient presenting with chronic suppurative otitis media in order to identify cholesteatoma.

Dr Reyes-Chicuellar conducted a study of the surgically confirmed cases of cholesteatoma during a five year period (2012-2017) across three main hospitals in the Top End; Katherine, Gove District and Royal Darwin Hospital.

A total of 749 ear surgeries were listed, of which 589 were performed on patients who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The surgical incidence of cholesteatoma was identified in 2.56 of these cases. Surgeries on the remaining 160 patients identified only 1.61 instances of cholesteatoma.

With higher instances of cholesteatoma affecting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population Dr Nayellin Reyes-Chicuellar is encouraging all medical practitioners to identify the condition earlier rather than later.

“The importance of early identification of cholesteatoma is related with the consequences of leaving it untreated, as it may cause local bone erosion and destruction of adjacent structures causing deafness, vertigo, facial weakness and potentially fatal complications such as sigmoid sinus thrombosis, meningitis and brain abscess,” she said.

Dr Reyes-Chicuellar will be presenting her findings and discussing the impact of cholesteatoma within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population at the upcoming Tristate Annual Scientific Meeting (ASM) this month.

Themed ‘Infection – from Head to Toe’, and being held in Alice Springs from 23-25 August, the ASM will involve speakers from South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and will include a number of interesting panel discussions, forums and presentations.

About the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)

RACS is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in Australia and New Zealand. The College is a not-for-profit organisation that represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and International Medical Graduates. RACS also supports healthcare and surgical education in the Asia-Pacific region and is a substantial funder of surgical research. There are nine surgical specialties in Australasia being: Cardiothoracic surgery, General surgery, Neurosurgery, Orthopaedic surgery, Otolaryngology Head-and-Neck surgery, Paediatric surgery, Plastic and Reconstructive surgery, Urology and Vascular surgery.

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