

Preventing childhood hospitalisation

- **Expansion of the Ministry of Health's Healthy Homes Initiative**
- **Proactive investigation and enforcement of Healthy Homes Standards**

The prevalence of rheumatic fever in New Zealand is a national shame. We are one of the few developed countries where the disease is still prevalent, with around 160 new hospitalisations of rheumatic fever a year.

Rheumatic fever can develop after a 'strep throat' – a throat infection caused by a Group A Streptococcus (GAS) bacteria. Most strep throats get better and don't lead to rheumatic fever. However, for some people an untreated strep throat leads the heart, joints, brain and skin to become inflamed and swollen.

Poor quality, crowded homes also raise the likelihood of contracting respiratory infections, and increase the severity of existing conditions such as asthma, leading to avoidable hospitalisations which contribute to higher medical costs.

In 2019, we invested \$12 million to support innovative programmes that work to reduce the incidence of rheumatic fever among both Māori and Pacific people and support better management of the illness. These initiatives include free school-based health clinics in disadvantaged communities, which have seen a significant reduction of rheumatic fever in some places, a pilot for screening for rheumatic heart disease among Māori and Pacific pregnant women, and policy support for the Healthy Homes Initiative.

Over the last three years, we also took a number of steps to prevent New Zealand children being hospitalised as a result of living in cold and damp homes:

- We are delivering over 18,000 new public and transitional homes by 2024.
- The Winter Energy Payment supported over 1 million New Zealanders to have warmer homes.
- Introduced Healthy Homes Standards that set minimum heating, insulation, ventilation, moisture and drainage standards. These standards will apply to new tenancies entered into after 1 July 2021, and apply to all rental homes from 2024.
- Warmer Kiwi Homes, which provides a 90 percent subsidy for heating and insulation. Over 28,000 insulation retrofits and almost 8,000 heating retrofits have been delivered since July 2018.
- Kāinga Ora has upgraded 3,557 public housing units to meet or exceed the Healthy Homes Standard at a cost of \$23.4 million, and have recently added a further \$500 million investment in the retrofit programme.

We have also announced that, if re-elected, Labour will establish a rheumatic fever register to help manage the care of those who have it. A nationwide register will help with ongoing and regular follow-up medication to people who have rheumatic fever, including reminders for the patient and their health providers. It will also help with continuity of care, particularly when people move around and change DHBs. More information is available in our [Health policy](#).

- **Labour will expand the Ministry of Health’s Healthy Homes Initiative**

The Ministry of Health’s Healthy Homes Initiative (HHI) was established in December 2013. The HHI identifies families at risk of housing-related illnesses like rheumatic fever and undertakes housing assessments. They then coordinate insulation, curtains, beds/bedding, floor coverings, heating sources or support to find alternative accommodation to create warmer, drier homes, for these families in order to improve their health.

A recent evaluation of HHI showed that, in the first year after the programme’s intervention, HHI prevented 1,533 hospitalisations and those hospitalised were in hospital for a shorter time and for less costly interventions. It was also estimated that there were 9,443 prevented GP visits directly attributable to the programme.

The programme also saved \$30 million in prevented or reduced hospitalisation and GP visits over three years. The total estimated cost to the Ministry of Health was \$18 million. This initial analysis is based only on outcomes from the first year and only for the referred child. In reality, all household members benefit.

Currently this programme is operating in the eleven District Health Boards (DHBs) with the highest incidence of rheumatic fever. The programme does not currently have access to sustainable funding to purchase housing-related interventions for families. Instead, the Ministry of Health funds coordinators who identify, coordinate and broker with existing services and agencies to source the necessary curtains, beds/bedding and floor coverings from mostly second hand or philanthropic organisations and refer families to other programmes.

Labour will provide additional funding of \$33 million over four years to the programme to boost the support provided by philanthropic and community services for the purchase of curtains, beds and bedding, portable heaters, floor coverings mould kits, and support for minor repairs to the home, to children and their families where a child has been hospitalised for housing related health conditions. As part of this, the Ministry of Health will also work with the Ministry of Social Development to ensure families in need who qualify for this programme are referred to their local DHB for this support.

Labour will also extend the programme to the remaining nine DHBs around New Zealand, at a cost of \$6 million over four years. It’s expected this will reach 2,500 new families.

- **Labour will increase funding for Tenancy Services to monitor compliance and enforce the Healthy Home Standards**

Nearly a third of households rent in New Zealand, and a significant proportion of rental homes are cold and damp. For example, the BRANZ 2015 House Condition Survey found that 22 percent of New Zealand rental homes have no fixed heating, compared to 7 percent of owner occupied properties with no fixed heating. The Healthy Homes Standards set minimum heating, insulation, ventilation, moisture and drainage standards. These standards will apply to new tenancies entered into after 1 July 2021, and apply to all rental homes from 2024.

Renters have less autonomy to make improvements to their homes than owner occupiers, and maintaining and improving the quality of the dwelling is the responsibility of the owner. While many landlords maintain and upgrade their properties, there are some who don't, leaving tenants living in cold, damp homes. Cold and damp housing not only causes illness,

imposes costs, and reduces the wellbeing of those New Zealanders living in them, it costs all of us – days away from school and work, preventable hospitalisations and the lost potential.

Tenants are often not in a position to request their landlord make changes to their homes to ensure they are warm and dry. When we introduced the Healthy Homes Standards we allocated \$15.14 million to support their implementation. Through this funding we built up both the capacity and powers of the Tenancy Compliance and Investigations Team (TCIT) and expanded its regional presence, into Manukau, Hamilton, Porirua, Christchurch and Dunedin. This team is funded to support the most vulnerable tenants who do not have the ability or resources to take action against non-compliance.

This was an important start, however, we need to ramp this work up to ensure the Healthy Homes Standards are being met. Labour will increase funding to Tenancy Services' Compliance and Enforcement team to proactively monitor and enforce the Health Homes Standards in high risk areas. Labour estimates this will cost \$16 million over four years.