



Media Release
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Ciguatera Survey

Researchers are turning to the public to find answers to the devastating effects that a little known disease called ciguatera (pronounced see-gwuh-ter-uh) can have on North Queenslanders.

James Cook University Associate Professor Kirsten Heimann said ciguatera has an enormous cost to human health and the economy and scientists are concerned that the largely undiagnosed disease may become more prevalent in North Queensland.

“Ciguatera is a debilitating disease induced by the consumption of a variety of tropical reef fish contaminated with toxins produced by marine algae called dinoflagellates,” A/Prof Heimann said.

Surprisingly little research has been done into the disease, which induces gastrointestinal and neurological symptoms that can persist for months. Now the Australian Government’s Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF) is funding A/Prof Heimann - the Queensland Smart Women, Smart State research award winner in 2008 - to investigate the disease.

“What happens is the toxin in some algae is consumed by small fish, which are eaten by bigger fish and the toxin is passed up the marine food web with large predator fish accumulating larger quantities of toxins until it ends up on people’s plates,” she said.

A/Prof Heimann is concerned that environmental stress leading to coral death might enable the particular algae that produces the toxins to establish in more areas of the Great Barrier Reef.

“Thus reductions in reef health – for example due to climate change - could result in an increase in the incidence of ciguatera, not just an increase in its diagnosis,” Dr Heimann said.

It is estimated that only one in five cases of the disease is actually diagnosed in North Queensland.

“We are planning to conduct a survey of the general public and recreational fishers, commercial fishers and indigenous groups to get a better handle on the real incidence rate of the disease and identify hot spots for the disease,” she said.

“In addition we are hoping to identify any seasonality in the disease, whether it is contracted at a particular time of the year more often than other times of the year.”

More than 4000 phone calls will be made during the public survey that will be conducted between Mackay and the Torres Strait.

