Tuberculosis screening for Health Care Workers (HCWs)

While Tuberculosis (TB) is uncommon in Australia, the Northern Territory has rates 3-4 times the national rate. Staff working in health care settings may be at risk of exposure to tuberculosis when diagnosis and treatment are delayed. The importance of maintaining a TB surveillance system of HCWs is increased by the growing number of immigrants to Australia from areas with a high prevalence of TB and the increasing number of multi-drug resistant (MDR) TB cases.

Tuberculosis screening is required for any student who will undertake placement in a health care setting involving activities that will bring them into contact with patients. Unless there is documentation of a past positive Tuberculin Skin Test (TST) / Quantiferon gold or prior history of TB, this screening should include a TST or Quantiferon gold test. Your GP will be able to refer you to the appropriate TB Screening agency for your test. The TST result is read 48-72 hours after the test is performed.

Periodic monitoring with TST can identify Health Care Workers (HCWs) newly infected and therefore at greater risk of developing TB.

The purpose of TB screening prior to clinical placements is to

- establish baseline health, TST or chest x-ray status;
- establish TB status and diagnosis and treat cases of TB disease; and
- raise awareness of TB disease and promote recognition of the signs of TB.

The purpose of screening during employment is to:

- detect recently acquired latent TB infection;
- diagnose and treat TB disease; and
- raise awareness of TB disease, to promote recognition of the signs and symptoms of TB.

TST -negative students should be retested following subsequent exposure to TB.

The frequency of screening varies from State /Territory to State/Territory and sometimes facility to facility. It is advisable to have the TST attended prior to any immunisations as some vaccines affect the TST result.

Contraindications to Tuberculin Skin Test include; if there has been; anaphylactic reaction, previous tuberculosis infection, previous positive Tuberculin Skin Test or if the person is on long term steroid therapy.