

HIV spike in travellers

Jennifer Elliot

eliotj@tcp.newstld.com.au

HETEROSEXUAL men working or holidaying in Papua New Guinea are returning to Cairns with HIV in alarming numbers, Queensland Health research shows.

In 2007, infections out of PNG increased five-fold and 20 per cent of all new diagnoses in Cairns were contracted in the country, compared with 6 per cent in 2006.

Family Planning Queensland, which has received money from Queensland Health to develop an awareness program, described the trend as alarming.

FPQ project officer Rowena Harper said the Northern Territory and Western Australia had also recorded a spike in heterosexual men contracting HIV in PNG.

The number of HIV cases in Cairns has doubled from 2005 to 2007.

"It's an unusual demographic to target in relation to HIV awareness," Ms Harper said.

"We're not used to hearing much about HIV and the heterosexual population (but) it's important to remember how close we are to many countries with high rates of HIV."

Ms Harper said it was estimated one in 50 people in PNG had HIV, with more women infected than men.



Fighting infection: Family Planning Queensland project officer Rowena Harper is developing a pamphlet on HIV targeted towards heterosexual men who travel to Papua New Guinea.

Picture: NELLIE PRATT

She said FPQ Cairns was working with employers, travel and health services to raise awareness of the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases among heterosexual males travelling overseas from Cairns for work or holidays.

"Many people travel between Far North Queensland and PNG, particularly for work purposes, and because rates of HIV infection are so low in Australia, it's easy to become complacent in practising safer sex," Ms Harper said.

"We're currently carrying out research with men in the local community who travel to countries with a high prevalence of HIV to come up with some messages and ways of communicating them that will be effective to this target group."