Introduction
Rheumatic fever is a serious preventable disease which may cause permanent heart damage. A 2008 review confirmed:

- The annual incidence of acute rheumatic fever in the Bay of Plenty (BOP) is nearly three times the New Zealand rate
- Kawerau, Opotiki and Murupara have some of the world’s highest recently documented age specific rates of acute rheumatic fever in children aged 5-14 years
- Most at risk are Māori tamariki/rangatahi aged 5-14 years - 90% of all cases in the BOP are Māori.

In response a strategic approach was developed which included a four month multi-media awareness campaign. This was launched in March 2010.

Aims of the campaign
- General awareness raising: To increase community awareness and knowledge of rheumatic fever across the BOP
- Targeted awareness raising: To increase awareness and understanding of rheumatic fever in high incidence communities
- GPs and health professionals: To promote the use of the Heart Foundation Rheumatic Fever Guidelines particularly Algorithm 4 – Guide for sore throat management.

The underlying premise of the campaign is that early diagnosis and treatment of strep throat will reduce the incidence of acute rheumatic fever.

Multi media campaign
- Press releases, advertorials and full page commissioned articles appeared in several local papers.
- Radio adverts promoting the ‘sore throats matter’ and ‘sore throats can break a heart’ messages played on 8 stations across the Bay.
- Rheumatic fever information was shared with school communities and articles featured in ‘Health Promoting Schools’ and school newsletters.
- A rheumatic fever web page was created on the Toi Te Ora website, http://www.toiteorapublichealth.govt.nz/rheumatic_fever-public

Awareness raising initiatives for GPs and health professionals
Presentations based on the National Heart Foundation Rheumatic Fever Guidelines were delivered to health professionals:
- Continuing Medical Education (CME) sessions in the mid and Western BOP
- ‘Grand Round’ presentations at Tauranga and Whakatane hospitals
- Rheumatic fever presentations to nursing students, public health and B4 school nurses

Evaluation of the awareness campaign
A total of 498 random face to face surveys were conducted in Tauranga, Kawerau and Whakatane. Surveys were administered before, during and after the awareness campaign.

Western Bay PHO GPs were also surveyed following the CME sessions regarding their use and knowledge of the National Heart Foundation Sore Throat Management Guidelines (53/89 GPs responded to the survey).

Qualitative themes
Surprise that rheumatic fever was still an issue: “I thought it was eradicated”
Cost identified as a barrier to GP visits “Can’t always check sore throats, can’t afford it”
The radio advertisements were effective and clearly recalled: “I remember the man from Opotiki talking about sore throats on the radio”
The 55 years and above age group retained knowledge that was lacking in the 15-24 year old age group: “My generation knew people with rheumatic fever”

Results
Awareness of rheumatic fever, sore throats and potential heart damage all showed an increase in both the mid and post awareness campaign surveys.

GP use of sore throat management guidelines

Conclusion
Overall, the campaign increased awareness and knowledge of rheumatic fever. However, a knowledge gap in the 15-24 year old age group was very apparent. The challenge is to develop innovative and creative approaches to reach the younger generation, many of whom will be the parents of tomorrow’s people.

Resources developed
- Display kits including pamphlets, posters and pull up banners.
- A rheumatic fever information booklet.
- A large model of the heart was also purchased to help children to understand how rheumatic fever can affect the heart

References

Acknowledgements
Toi Te Ora – Public Health Service: Dr Phil Shoe money, Dr Jim Miller, Russell Ingram Seal, Clare Dowkhile, Te Ao Hou PHO/WHISH: Sandra Ball, Nīke Walker, Miriam Steadman, Darryl Paruru, Waiariki Institute of Technology: Bridie McPherson, Sianey Stent, Shelly Smith, Marie Curle, Kelly Stewart, Karen White, Deborah Stewart