

TRANSCRIPT

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Transcript: AMA Queensland President Dr Nick Yim, ABC Radio Sunshine Coast, *Drive with Annie Gaffney*, Wednesday 7 May 2025

Subjects: Lyme disease

ANNIE GAFFNEY: You have just been hearing from Sharon Whiteman, Vice President of the Lyme Disease Association of Australia. She believes that contracting Lyme disease in Australia is entirely possible, and that thousands of Australians are currently living with the ill effects of contracting this disease in Australia where it is not recognised.

Dr Nick Yim is a Hervey Bay-based GP and the President of the Australian Medical Association in Queensland. I caught up with Dr Yim earlier this afternoon and asked him why there has been little recognition by doctors that Lyme disease actually exists in Australia – as in, has been caught and contracted in Australia.

DR NICK YIM: This is one of the great challenges that we are facing. We had the recent 2025 senate inquiry into the ongoing concerns regarding diagnosis and treatment. The Australian Government and the researchers, they currently state that there is no evidence of locally acquired Lyme disease. But without a doubt, there are many people in our community who have symptoms similar to Lyme disease.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: This kind of stance by Australian medicos is despite the fact that people like Sharon Whiteman have had their blood tested overseas and it's come back with a positive Lyme disease diagnosis. Sharon Whiteman was bitten by a tick here in Pinbarren near Pomona on the Sunshine Coast. So how do you explain that kind of result when there isn't the recognition that Lyme disease exists in Australia?

DR NICK YIM: This is one of the great challenges. So, people state they have been bitten by a tick locally, they get tested overseas, they have the symptoms. This is why we often call for increased research and education, so we can ensure that we have best practice for our country based on the evidence.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: How many GPs would even be aware of the symptoms of tick-borne diseases if, like Sharon, she had the classic bullseye rash show up around the tick bite when she was bitten all those years ago? But if I, or anyone else, was to go into a GP with that kind of symptom after being bitten by a tick, how would we be treated?

DR NICK YIM: In Queensland and Australia, we do have multiple different types of ticks that present with similar signs and symptoms. We have the Queensland scrub tick around. Q fever can also present with similar symptoms. But the key thing is, if people do have symptoms – such as rashes on the skin, joint pain – they should have a conversation with their GP because they often will look for clues in blood tests, and if they're not sure, a referral to an infectious disease specialist.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: How quickly should you be treated for a tick bite if you're getting any of those symptoms to prevent it from progressing to a more serious illness?

DR NICK YIM: This is the area where evidence base is required. In Queensland, we can get exposed to many types of ticks and they can produce similar symptoms. Examples include Q fever and Queensland tick typhus. The key thing is presenting to your GP if you are having symptoms of rashes or joint pain, and to have that discussion with your GP to ensure we are getting the right diagnosis and can implement the right management. The challenge exists in that some management, such as those highly powerful antibiotics, can lead to side effects, which is the reason why it's not wise for us to be giving out antibiotics to every single presentation.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: What is the ability to test for Lyme disease here in Australia? If someone suspects they are developing serious symptoms from a tick bite, can you actually be tested for Lyme disease in Australia at this point in time?

DR NICK YIM: This is where there's a bit of confusion. Historically, there were concerns from medical practitioners that regulations hindered their ability to test for Lyme disease and other associated viruses and bacteria. But the key thing is, when people are getting blood tests, GPs will look for clues as to what type of infection it might be, and if there's any uncertainties, there can always be a referral to an infectious disease specialist.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: Is there the capacity to test for the disease in Australia though?

DR NICK YIM: To my knowledge, there is testing available, but it needs to be referred by a subspecialist.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: Have you ever diagnosed Lyme disease or tick-borne illness in a patient coming in?

DR NICK YIM: I've seen many patients who have been bitten by ticks, and they have their associated symptoms. People do go bushwalking, they may be bitten by a tick, they may have symptoms such as fevers and joint pain, but they make a very quick recovery. Myself personally, I have not diagnosed Lyme disease in Australia.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: There were a number of recommendations that came out of both the 2016 senate inquiry and then this most recent 2025 one. According to Sharon Whiteman, she says that one of those recommendations was that we give back medical autonomy to doctors for treatment, that there were two clinical pathways developed by tick treating doctors here in Australia and we should instate those. What are your thoughts around that, Nick?

DR NICK YIM: We need to ensure there is an evidence-based clinical pathway. We acknowledge that there are many people who do have symptoms similar to Lyme disease. We need diagnosis, we need management, because many people are suffering. This is the reason why we need to ensure we are investing into research to ensure that clinical pathways are in place.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: Dr Nick Yim, do you believe that at any stage we could have a result here in Australia – that we do have Lyme disease prevalent in this country carried by ticks? Also, that we're not doing enough to educate people about the really negative possibilities to their health that can come out of tick bites? Are we treating this seriously enough?

DR NICK YIM: What I'm confident in is modern medicine as we continue to grow with knowledge. At the same time, our research base continues to grow, and down the track we will have an evidence-based treatment model moving forward. So, I am confident.

ANNIE GAFFNEY: Dr Nick Yim, the President of AMA Queensland.

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