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**QLD Schoolies flirting with health hazards offshore**

**Scores of Queensland teenagers celebrating ‘Schoolies Week’ (November 16-23) offshore are oblivious to potentially fatal health hazards, according to leading travel health pioneer, Dr Deb Mills.**

**The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) estimates 48,500 students will graduate from Queensland high schools this year, many of whom will celebrate the milestone at the new Schoolies hotspots of Bali, Thailand, Cambodia, Fiji and Vanuatu.**

“The transition from student to school-leaver represents an important ‘rite of passage’ for young Queenslanders,” said Dr Deb, travel doctor and spokesperson for the Travel Medicine Alliance, Brisbane.

“But what’s concerning is their naivety to many health risks posed by increasingly popular overseas party destinations.

“While schools and families often educate school-leavers about the dangers of sex, drugs and alcohol, the basics of overseas pre-travel health preparation – carrying a medical kit and having up-to-date travel vaccinations – are often overlooked,” Dr Deb said.

Some of the potentially life-threatening diseases school-leavers may be exposed to while partying in Bali, Thailand and Fiji this month include rabies, hepatitis A, meningococcal disease, measles, gastrointestinal infections, malaria and dengue.

Dr Deb is urging Queensland Schoolies heading overseas to visit a travel doctor or their local GP now for a health check and to learn about ways to protect against infectious diseases, including vaccination.

“Many school-leavers mistakenly think because they have completed their routine childhood vaccines they are protected against various vaccine-preventable diseases. Unfortunately, routine vaccines do not provide sufficient protection for overseas travel,” Dr Mills said.

“It’s important to have the necessary vaccines and remember that some vaccines need to be administered ahead of time to provide effective protection.”

According to Dr Deb, the need for hepatitis vaccine coverage may be a little confusing, as there are different strains of hepatitis.

“Hepatitis B protection is part of the routine vaccine schedule, but overseas travellers are also at risk of hepatitis A, which is not a routine vaccine.

“Hepatitis A can be contracted from contaminated food, or via contact with surfaces such as doorknobs and money,” said Dr Deb.

“Schoolies who contract hepatitis A may find it very challenging to start university on time, but having one hepatitis A vaccine covers you for your trip.”

Companies specialising in overseas Schoolies sojourns to the exotic locations of Fiji, Indonesia, Vanuatu, Thailand and Cambodia, are reportedly recording significant year-on-year growth. But this travel carries real, potential health hazards as recognised by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), which recently advised school-leavers planning to party offshore to *‘drink responsibly, look after your mates, don’t break the law, don’t carry or consume any drugs, don’t go swimming when drunk or stoned, and to take out travel insurance.’* The Department also warned Schoolies, that should they get into trouble overseas, Australian diplomats cannot bail them out.1

“Accessing medical care can also prove highly expensive overseas and the Australian Government does not cover overseas medical expenses or evacuation costs,” Dr Deb said.

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“The overarching goal should be to travel and party safely. However many school-leavers who are planning to let their hair down during Schoolies, do not seek pre-travel preventative health advice and may be unaware of the health risks and protection offered by immunisation,” said Dr Deb.

A recent study into the travel risk behaviours and uptake of pre-travel health preventions by University of New South Wales studentsfound almost 70 per cent of the 2,000 survey respondents had not sought any pre-travel health advice before heading overseas.2

“The study authors reported an overall low risk perception of travel threats and a low level of concern for these threats,” Dr Deb said.

The study highlighted the need to educate students about the unexpected hazards associated with travel and to improve preventative health-seeking behaviours and uptake of precautionary health measures.

Sunscreen and travel insurance were the most common health precautions taken by student respondents, while anti-malarial medications and vaccines rated among the lowest health precautions.

Former Gold Coast resident, Michael Cameron, 20, opted for Kuta, Bali as his Schoolies destination last year. He planned to travel with a group of mates on this “trip of a lifetime” which promised sun, sand, surf and endless partying.

If Michael’s friends hadn’t urged him to visit a travel doctor before departure, his trip would have taken a disastrous turn, following an unprovoked attack by a monkey on a guided tour.

“I was sitting about a metre away from a monkey in the forest. I dropped a lolly wrapper and then the monkey jumped on me and hacked into my back. It didn’t hurt, it was more of a shock,” he said.

Fortunately Michael was vaccinated against certain infectious diseases.

“I saw my local GP about two months before heading off to Bali. I had plently of time to get vaccinated,” said Michael.

People who travel overseas have up to a one-in-two (50 per cent) chance of experiencing a travel-related illness.3

Fortunately there are ways to help protect against many travel-related infectious diseases, particularly in tropical regions.

A pre-travel doctor visit includes a discussion of immunisations, prophylactic medications (such as antimalarial drugs), and specific health advice for preventing and treating travellers’ diarrhoea and other illnesses the traveller may experience.

Schoolies who have chronic health issues or take medications may also need to coordinate pre-travel care with their regular doctors.

According to Dr Deb, ‘preparation’ is key to travelling well. Follow her three simple tips for travelling and partying safely offshore:

1. **Have your shots;**
2. **Pack a medical kit; and**
3. **Learn about the local hazards and how to avoid them, to have a good time.**

**For more information, or to ask Dr Deb a question about ‘Schoolies travelling well’, visit her at** [**www.thetraveldoctor.com.au/blog**](http://www.thetraveldoctor.com.au/blog)

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| ***ends#*****----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------****To arrange an interview with Dr Deb or for more information, please contact Joni Thomes, Kirsten Bruce or Emma Boscheinen from VIVA! Communications on 0430 149 642 / 0401 717 566 / 0410 630 531.**  |

**References**

1. **Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Schoolies/Leavers. Available at** <http://smartraveller.gov.au/tips/schoolies.html> **[last accessed November 12, 2013].**
2. **Heywood et al: *Travel Risk Behaviours and Uptake of pre-travel health preventions by university students in Australia*. BMC Infectious Diseases 2012, 12:43.**
3. State Government of Victoria. Better Health. Travel health tips. 2012.