

Aborigines face leprosy threat

COULD BE WORSE THAN TRACHOMA

By JACK WATERFORD.

Leprosy, not trachoma, may be the most serious environmental disease facing Aborigines in the top half of the Northern Territory.

As with trachoma, treatment can now arrest the disease. As with trachoma, it is believed to be a contact disease and thus related to living conditions such as the availability of water, good food, shelter, housing and the extent of crowding.

As with trachoma, leprosy almost certainly was unknown in Australia until white settlement, first beginning to show itself in the Alligator Rivers area about 50 years ago. As with trachoma, it is a disease now almost totally unknown among the whites, though it continues to ravage the blacks.

Of 850 cases of leprosy in the Northern Territory in 1970, almost all at the Top End, 720 cases involved full-blood Aborigines, while another 100 cases involved part Aborigines.

The Northern Territory Medical Service (NTMS) and other health authorities in the areas are well aware of the problem and devoting much attention to it. As a result of drug treatments now available, only a very small proportion of known

bushfire which continues to smoulder at the periphery whilst at the centre the fire flickers and dies leaving scarred and wilted remnants in its wake".

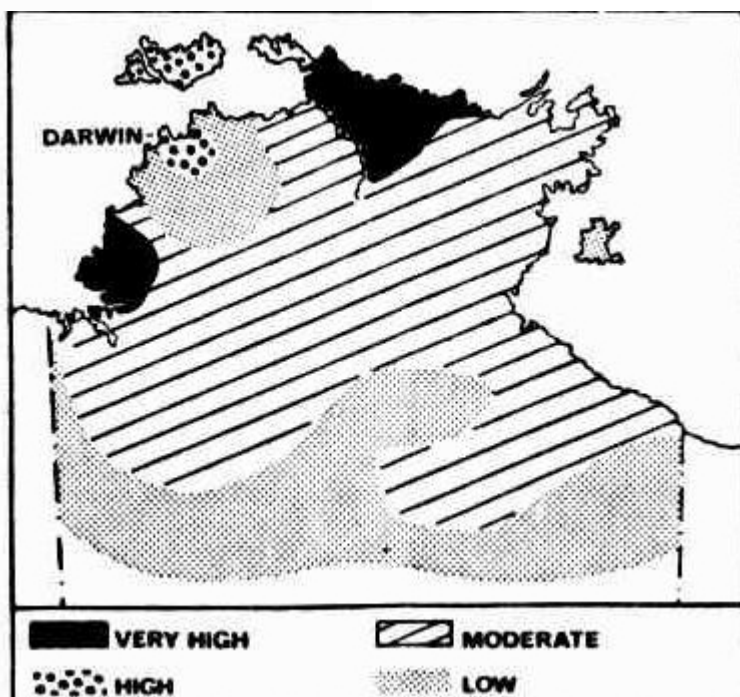
"Aborigines in the northern part of the Northern Territory are often aware of the early signs of leprosy", his thesis says at another point. "Many of them, however, remember long periods of isolation from their tribal country and doubt the value of the treatment offered them.

"There are other reasons . . . that prevent or discourage them from attracting attention to any stigma they may develop.

leprosy cases are active and infectious, and some of the terrible deformities caused by the disease are capable of surgery and repair.

But the disease is not under control. And the attention of health authorities is still focused on the detection and subsequent treatment of leprosy sufferers rather than in attacking some of the conditions in which the disease spreads.

The leading NTMS expert on leprosy, Dr J. C. Hargrave, said in a thesis two years ago that the course of leprosy among blacks in the Northern Territory was "not unlike that of a slowly spreading bushfire which continues to smoulder at the periphery whilst at



Areas of leprosy distribution in the Northern Territory

"Surveys for leprosy have therefore assumed an important place in the work of the NTMS now for many years. In the endemic areas, most Aborigines are seen at fairly regular intervals and it would be rare for anyone in any area to be

rare for anyone in any area to be seen and examined less than once every five years".

Cases of the disease are now being found in Central Australia.

In the worst affected areas, shown in the map, much has yet to be done about living conditions. A majority of people still live in overcrowded humpies rather than in houses, while access to water and good food is usually poor. Housing programs organised by the Catholic Church mission on Bathurst Island, regarded as a high risk area, for example, will soon grind to a halt for lack of money.