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Health research in donations crossfire

ANNIKA SMETHURST

SCIENTISTS researching flesh-eating bacteria believe some Australians will be “at greater risk of disease and death” because the Federal Government’s proposed crackdown on foreign donations will put research funding at risk.

The Global Health Alliance, which represents groups including the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and The Fred Hollows Foundation, fears it will be unintentionally caught up in a foreign political donations ban which followed Sam Dastyari’s dealings with a NSW-based Chinese businessman.

The group has asked the Turnbull Government to “significantly” redraft the legislation over concerns scientists could face criminal penalties if the Bill isn’t changed.

Misha Coleman, executive director of Global Health Alliance Melbourne, said Australian scientists researching Buruli ulcer, a flesh-eating bacteria present in Far North Queensland, coastal Victoria and the south coast of NSW, were funded through international donations.

The bacteria, which causes severe pain as it eats body tissue, is spread by mosquitoes.

The number of cases has more than tripled in five years in some parts of Australia.

Ms Coleman said Australians living in high-risk areas such as Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula would be at greater risk of disease and death if the Bill went through unchanged.

“Scientists researching this bacteria are funded through international donations,” she said. “Under this Bill, their

public statements on the health risks would be categorised as ‘political’ and consequently captured in its broad definition.

“We would be in an absurd situation where warning the public would make scientists liable for criminal penalties.

“The Bill needs to be very significantly redrafted.”

But the Turnbull Government has disputed the claim, arguing the new laws would not stop charities expressing a view or advocating for or against political parties.

Finance Minister Mathias Cormann said charities would continue to attract foreign donations to fund non-political activities.

“This Bill does not prevent charities from receiving and using foreign donations for non-political activities in Australia,” Senator Cormann said.

“This Bill allows charities to continue to collect foreign donations to fund non-political activity, such as medical research, conservation or aid projects as well as raise political donations from Australians and Australian organisations to fund political expenditure in Australia.”

He said the Government was open to amending the legislation based on findings and recommendations of a parliamentary committee.



Fatal fear: Misha Coleman.