Press release
For consumer media only

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MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: VINCENT FANTAUZZO REVEALS THE UNSEEN IMPACT OF MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

- *Archibald Prize-winning artist Vincent Fantauzzo joins meningococcal disease survivor and model Juttima Chinnasri in a powerful life drawing class to educate young Australians about Invasive Meningococcal Disease (IMD)*

- *Young Australians and their parents are being urged to know the signs and symptoms of IMD ahead of the critical 'schoolies' period, with teens aged 15-19 among the highest-risk groups* [1]

- *Students warned: 'don't wait for a rash before seeking medical advice' as this symptom can appear late or not at all* [2,3]

Award-winning Australian artist Vincent Fantauzzo has returned to the classroom, leading a talented group of visual art students in a powerful life drawing class to highlight invasive meningococcal disease (IMD).

The one-off class included selected RMIT students and other budding artists - where Vincent earned his own fine art degrees - and was specially curated to highlight the impact of IMD, the visible and invisible scars carried by survivors.

Fantauzzo carefully guided students to draw muse, model and meningococcal disease survivor Juttima Chinnasri.

Students were initially unaware of Juttima's experience before she revealed her physical and emotional legacies, which are a permanent reminder of her experience with the disease eight years ago.

As the group began capturing her on canvas, Vincent encouraged Juttima to share more of her story and what she hopes others can learn from her experience.

She told those gathered about how IMD changed her life and perspective, and why she's a passionate disability advocate and supporter of disease education.

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Now a professional model who has walked in Australian Fashion Week, Juttima said she carries both “visible and invisible” scars from the ordeal, which resulted in the loss of her fingertips and both legs below the knee.

She was just 28 years old when she contracted IMD, initially experiencing a high temperature, headache and vomiting before her condition rapidly deteriorated - leaving her on life support for a week. Her condition deteriorated to the point where she faced a choice between amputation and a likely fatal outcome from the disease.

Juttima said: ***“****My experience showed me that meningococcal disease isn’t just about what happens when you’re sick. The emotional impact stays with you long after you recover, and that’s something people don’t always see.*

“Meningococcal disease can change your life. I’m sharing my experience and posing as a professional model for this class to help other young people. I’m passionate about disability advocacy and hope by telling my story, maybe it will mean someone else is aware of the early signs and symptoms, so they know when to act.”

Among student artists was 20-year-old Casey Moloney. While capturing Juttima's story on canvas she described her own experience – contracting meningococcal disease as a two-year-old and carrying physical and emotional scars. Casey has found solace in art.

Casey Moloney says: *"My parents were told I had little chance of surviving but after two weeks in intensive care, I made it through. During my recovery, art gave me an escape, but it also gave me something more, it helped me heal and improved the mobility in my hands.”*

Vincent Fantauzzo added: *“Art's an incredible vehicle for making a change. As an artist, I’m interested in the things we can’t always see. Meningococcal disease can leave emotional and psychological impacts long after someone has physically recovered, so this art class is about making that invisible experience visible. I want these students to capture her meningococcal disease story and also portray the amazing woman she is today.”*

Meningococcal disease can progress rapidly, with some people becoming critically ill within hours.[4] While a rash is one of the most commonly known symptoms of the disease, it may be the last symptom to appear, and in some cases, it may not appear at all.
Meningococcal disease can be hard to identify as early symptoms can resemble a flu-like illness including fever, headache, drowsiness and vomiting.[3]

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In some cases, more specific symptoms like a stiff neck or aversion to light may be apparent.[3,4]

A rash, if it appears, is a sign of advanced infection, and urgent medical attention is critical. But some of those who contract meningococcal disease have minimal warning and every hour without treatment risks irreversible damage. [3,5]

If the bacteria enter the bloodstream, it can cause a rash later in the illness and may lead to serious complications like skin damage or even amputation. [3,4] Meningococcal disease can also cause swelling of the lining around the brain and spinal cord, known as meningitis, and can lead to symptoms like confusion or headaches. Long-term effects may include headaches or problems with thinking and memory. [6,7]

It is estimated that around one in five survivors are left with life-changing disabilities such as deafness, limb loss or brain injury.[4]

Beyond the possible physical consequences, survivors may carry lasting emotional scars, including anxiety or other invisible psychological impacts.[6]

Leading public health and infectious diseases expert **Associate Professor Daryl Cheng** says global data shows up to one in four (24%) 19-year-olds may be unknowing carriers of the meningococcal bacteria without ever feeling sick or becoming unwell.[7]

Associate Professor Cheng commented: *"Meningococcal disease is rare, but it is a serious and potentially life-threatening infection that can progress rapidly. Infants, adolescents and young adults are at higher risk, so parents, carers and young people need to be vigilant, particularly as early symptoms can be non-specific and may easily be mistaken for a cold, flu or simply being run down. While the risk of contracting invasive meningococcal disease is low, knowing the signs and acting quickly if symptoms appear is critical."*

He is urging young people preparing to attend 'schoolies' or other gatherings in the coming weeks to be mindful that large gatherings can facilitate spread of the bacteria.[8,9]

Associate Professor Cheng added: *"The meningococcal bacteria are spread through close contact - tiny droplets from the nose and throat - so coughing, sneezing, living in close quarters, or kissing can all increase the risk. Certain lifestyle behaviours, such as smoking can also increase risk."*

Meningitis Centre Australia CEO Karen Quick says she continues to work and support dozens of families around the country whose lives have been forever altered by meningococcal disease.

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Ms Quick says*: "These families do often carry visible and invisible scars. It's not just the person affected - the ripple effect resulting from one case of meningococcal can be extensive, including families, friends and communities. Families often carry an emotional burden – seeing a loved one so sick or fighting for their life can be a very frightening experience. Whatever the outcome, it's an experience most people will never forget. The more we talk about the symptoms and different types of meningococcal disease, the better chance we have of protecting young people."*

Good hygiene practices such as handwashing, coughing or sneezing into your elbow and discarding used tissues promptly, are important to help prevent the spread of germs. Vaccines can also help protect against meningococcal disease. [3]

For more information about meningococcal disease, including signs and symptoms, visit www.knowmeningococcal.com.au and speak with your doctor or healthcare professional. Appropriate treatment and prevention options should be discussed with a healthcare professional.

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About invasive meningococcal disease

Affecting over 100 Australians annually, invasive meningococcal disease is a rare bacterial infection caused by a bacteria called Neisseria meningitidis.[3] There are multiple types (strains) of meningococcal bacteria. Globally, there are 6 types which most commonly cause disease (A, C, W, X and Y).[8] Currently in Australia, 3 strains cause the majority of disease.[1]

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While most people infected will survive and recover, this rare but potentially devastating infection can progress rapidly and lead to serious consequences (up to 1 in 3 who survive the disease may suffer long-term complications or disability, which may include, among others, chronic headaches, skin scarring, brain damage, deafness or loss of limb/s)[6] or death (up to 1 in 10 infected may die) even with appropriate medical care, within 24-48 hours.[3,4,6]

While meningococcal disease can occur at any age, infants, small children, adolescents, and young adults between 15-24 years old are at most risk.[10] Early symptoms of IMD may be non-specific.[3]

Symptoms may include sudden onset of fever, headache, neck stiffness, joint pain, rash of red-purple spots or bruises, dislike of bright lights and nausea and vomiting.[3] The distinctive purple or red meningococcal rash is an advanced symptom of blood infection, which may or may not occur.[3] Young children may have less-specific symptoms including irritability, difficulty waking, high-pitched crying, a bulging fontanelle (soft spot on top of the head), and refusal to eat.[3]

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About GSK

GSK is a global biopharma company with a purpose to unite science, technology, and talent to get ahead of disease together. Find out more at gsk.com.

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