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Dramatic dive in Tiwi children's death rates

HAYLEY SORENSEN

IN the 1960s, half of all deaths recorded on the Tiwi Islands were of children aged 15 or under.

But a study of more than five decades of data has shown a dramatic turnaround of that tragic trend.

Researchers from the University of Queensland looked at medical and death records detailing the deaths of 1156 people between 1960 and 2010.

The Tiwis have some of the country's worst death rates – in the 1990s, Tiwi islanders died at six times the rate of other Australians.

The study's lead author Professor Wendy Hoy said things were improving, with a "dramatic improvement in life expectancy" over the life of the study.

Professor Hoy said low birthweights and poor maternal and child health services were part of the reason for the

high death rates of children on the Tiwis in the 1960s.

"With progressively improving health services, most frail and underweight infants and children are now surviving into adulthood, but their poor early start to life has made them at least twice as vulnerable to chronic diseases," she said.

"Birth weights are now trending towards a more healthy range, and while it will be a generation or two before

this is fully reflected in adult health, we can look forward to further improvements."

Between 1986 and 1990, the natural death rate for those under 15 was 547 per 100,000. That fell to just 60 between 2006 and 2010.

The population of Tiwi Islands has almost tripled since 1986. It's a rare good news story for Indigenous health in the Territory.

Professor Hoy said comparing Indigenous outcomes to those of white Australians was

unhelpful, and led to negativity. "These discussions need to be moderated by a more mature view, informed by historical perspectives," she said.

However the researchers detailed an "excess of deaths by misadventure" in the latter years of the study.

"Such deaths, often alcohol or drug-fuelled, are prominent among young Aboriginal adults nationwide, and are of grave concern."