

# Media Release

## An Everest of help for Preterm Birth Research

2 July 2014

Garry Williams has recently been climbing on the highest mountain in the world to help Perth's sickest, premature babies.

In April this year Garry climbed 7000 metres high up Mount Everest, raising over \$17, 000 for Subiaco's Women and Infants Research Foundation (WIRF).

The funds raised by Garry have been awarded as a starter grant to the Foundation's Dr Demelza Ireland for her work into predicting and treating infection-related risk of premature birth. The work could help to identify and prevent many possible early preterm births in Western Australia.

Garry suffered altitude sickness (AMS) during his attempt to summit the world's highest mountain, and was just 1848 metres shy of the top peak. Although disappointed that he didn't make the top, Garry is proud of the funds he raised for WIRF, motivated by the premature birth of his daughter, Shan, 15 years ago. Garry was also in the process of climbing Everest when the recent avalanche claimed the lives of sixteen Nepali Sherpas, but was thankfully on the north (Tibetan) side of the mountain.

WIRF's Executive Director, Professor John Newnham said "Garry's attempt to summit Mount Everest is nothing short of heroic and the Foundation is eternally grateful for the funds he raised for our preterm birth prevention research. The Starter Grant awarded to Dr Ireland will be integral to the Foundation's goal of preventing premature birth – the leading cause of death and disability for almost 3000 Western Australian babies each year".

Dr Ireland was thrilled to receive the grant and said "every research dollar I spend will remind me of every step Garry took on Everest". Dr Ireland's work aims to develop criteria and a blood test for the selection and identification of women at risk of an infection-related preterm birth. Dr Ireland said "infection in the uterus is known to be a cause of very early preterm birth; however it is not known why particular bacteria, such as Ureaplasma, can be harmless in some women but cause infection-related preterm birth in others".

"Ureaplasma is common bacteria found in the vagina of approximately 50 percent of women, and in many cases has no ill-effects. My study will look at how the immune system recognises Ureaplasma in pregnant women to determine if there is a change in the way the bacteria is responded to by women who deliver their babies early. Identifying women at risk of infection-related preterm birth will allow for preventative measures and treatments", said Dr Ireland.

WIRF has been pivotal in establishing the careers of many high profile WA medical researchers, including Professor Fiona Stanley, through its' Starter Grants Program. Prof Newnham's own WIRF starter grant in 1988 was the seed that led to the development of one of the world's largest pregnancy and childhood datasets in the world, the Western Australia Raine Pregnancy Cohort. The Starter Grants program supports new researchers to conduct high quality research through various grant funding and scholarship opportunities.

Garry would like to thank everyone who supported his journey by donating to WIRF, including the Minderoo Foundation and his work colleagues at Fortescue Metals Group (FMG).

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Dr Demelza Ireland, Professor John Newnham, Nicola Forrest (Minderoo Foundation) and Garry Williams presenting his donation



Garry, May 2014, at 7000 metres with the Mount Everest peak in the background.