

Media Release

Pioneering research achieves 8% reduction in rate of preterm birth

Wednesday, 30 November 2016

A unique Western Australian-based research program aiming to significantly reduce rates of preterm birth across the State is set to benefit the millions of infants and families worldwide who will potentially suffer from this condition.

In a world first, the whole-of-population, whole-of-state program, The Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative, has successfully lowered the rate of preterm birth across WA by 8 per cent with the results this week published in the prestigious medical journal, The American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology.

Preterm birth complications are the leading cause of death and disability among children under five years of age in the developed world. According to WHO data, preterm birth was responsible for nearly 1 million deaths in 2015. In WA alone, more than 2900 babies are born preterm each year.

Chair and Founder of the Initiative and Executive Director of the Women and Infants Research Foundation (WIRF), Professor John Newnham said the marked decline was the result of researchers, doctors, health professionals, families and government working collaboratively to develop solutions to a critical area of human health.

“Until recently, preventing preterm birth was an idea limited to the world of research. But the discovery and translation of effective new strategies, coupled with a multi-faceted commitment to educating health care professionals and families, has enabled change on such a scale,” Prof Newnham said.

“These results have global implications for safely and effectively lowering the rate of preterm birth, saving countless lives and preventing lifelong disability.”

First launched in late 2014, the Initiative encompasses new clinical guidelines, an outreach program for health care practitioners, a public health program for women and their families, and a new clinic at the State’s sole tertiary level perinatal centre.

“Achieving an almost 8 per cent (196 fewer cases relative to the preceding year) reduction in the rate of preterm birth in the first year of implementation is very pleasing,” Prof Newnham said.

“Within the tertiary level centre, the rate of preterm birth in 2015 was also significantly lower than in the preceding years. These results have global implications for safely and effectively lowering the rate of preterm birth, saving countless lives and preventing lifelong disability.”

The Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative has been unique in that it has harnessed both the entire health care workforce and the families of our state. It is the first program in the world to have safely lowered the rate of preterm birth across the gestational age spectrum, including births as early as the 28-31 week category.

This Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative has been supported by the Western Australian State Government, the Women and Infants Research Foundation, Channel 7 Telethon and private philanthropy.

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'Reducing preterm birth by a state-wide multifaceted program – an implementation study', can be viewed online at The American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology here:
<http://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S0002937816320634>

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Media note:

Professor John Newnham is available for media interviews. Prof Newnham is the Executive Director of the Women and Infants Research Foundation and Chair and Founder of The Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative. He is also Professor of Obstetrics at The University of Western Australia (UWA) and Head of the UWA School of Women's and Infants' Health based at King Edward Memorial Hospital.

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Background: The Women and Infants Research Foundation is Western Australia's leading independent research institution dedicated to improving the health of women, infants and reproductive health. We have a proud 40-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement centred on the eradication of disease and the reduction of illness in women of all ages and babies.