



women & infants
research foundation

Media Release

Study investigates lasting impacts of late preterm birth

Wednesday, 7 November 2018

New research by the Women & Infants Research Foundation (WIRF) has described a key link between late preterm birth and the potential for long-term developmental disorders.

Recently published in the leading medical journal, *Seminars in Fetal and Neonatal Medicine*, the study 'Is it possible to safely prevent late preterm and early term births?' examines the ongoing challenge for obstetricians in optimising long-term neurological outcomes and avoiding rare but devastating term stillbirths.

WIRF Chief Scientific Director and study author, Prof John Newnham, said unless there was a solid obstetric or medical justification to do so, no pregnancy should be ended before at least 38 weeks.

"In cases where there is no such medical reason, people need to be aware of the fact that if they're choosing to deliver at 37 weeks, there are consequences potentially for the child," he said.

"The data we've just published show that if you deliver at 37 weeks rather than later in pregnancy, you will have to deliver about 550 babies to possibly prevent one baby from dying from term stillbirth.

"However, with this same course of action, you will have quite a few children which will have some developmental disorders as a potential risk.

"Imagine a class of 30 children in a school of 500 children. If you delivered everybody as a policy at 37 weeks, you'd have one extra child in the school – the child not lost to term stillbirth. This also means that in each classroom of 30 children you would have two more children with a behavioural disorder, and every second classroom would have a child with a significant educational disability."

Lead author and Consultant in Maternal Fetal Medicine, King Edward Memorial Hospital, Dr Scott White said that despite several major advances in the field of obstetrics, understanding how events before birth, and around the time of birth, impact the long-term was still relatively new.

"If a pregnancy needs to be ended early for medical reasons, then of course that baby should be delivered. But if there is no such medical reason then couples need to be aware of the potential effects on the child of being born before 38 weeks," Dr White said.

"The brain is not fully developed at 37 weeks and avoiding early birth, so long as that it is safe, is the preferable course of action."

Prof Newnham said that the fine judgment as to whether to deliver early or continue the pregnancy was a difficult decision and really the art and science of obstetrics.

"It's a partnership decision between the woman and the obstetrician, but they need the best data and information they can get and that's what we've just published."

The paper 'Is it possible to safely prevent late preterm and early term births?' has been published in the *Seminars in Fetal and Neonatal Medicine* and can be viewed here:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1744165X18301252>



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Media opportunity:

Lead author, Dr Scott White is available for interview and follow-up media comment. You can view his WIRF [researcher profile here](#).

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Background:

The Women and Infants Research Foundation

The Women & Infants Research Foundation is one of Australia's leading independent research institutes dedicated to improving the health of women and infants.

We focus our research and programs across three principal areas: the prevention of preterm birth, gynaecological cancers, and women's mental health. This research and programs have directly contributed to a number of improved clinical practices and health outcomes.