

## Media Release

### Event to canvass a way forward to reduce Tasmania's preterm birth rates

**Embargoed until Saturday, 10 November 2018**

An event to address Tasmania's alarming rates of preterm birth, currently the highest in the country<sup>1</sup>, is set to benefit thousands of women, families and infants across the state.

Preterm birth is the leading cause of death and disability in children up to five years of age in the developed world including Australia. Worldwide, an estimated 15 million babies are born preterm (before 37 weeks) each year.

In 2005, Tasmania had the lowest preterm birth rate in the country (6.9%), however over the past 10 years, the preterm birth rate has continued to rise and has consistently been above that of the national average (which has remained relatively constant between 8.1 and 8.7%).

In 2015, and again in 2016, Tasmania had the highest preterm birth rate in the country – 11.3%<sup>1</sup>.

Tasmanian representative of The Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance (APBPA) and Staff Specialist Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Royal Hobart Hospital, Dr Lindsay Edwards, said that by recognising the significant morbidity (and mortality) associated with preterm birth, and the current situation in the State, it was imperative that all possible steps were taken to safely lower the preterm birth rate in Tasmania.

“By adapting, modifying and tailoring the successes of the world-first WA Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative which has reduced the rate of preterm birth by 8% in its first year of full implementation to the Tasmanian environment, we hope to prevent a significant portion of our babies being born too soon,” Dr Edwards said.

“This needs to be done by bringing together clinical leaders, our health department, and communities, all united in their commitment to reducing the rate of preterm birth.”

Dr Lindsay Edwards and co-member of the APBPA, Dr Amanda Dennis, will host an event, in conjunction with the Tasmanian Regional Committee of RANZCOG, and with the support of the Tasmanian Health Service, to raise awareness about the high preterm birth rate in Tasmania, and to begin an education campaign about the steps that must be taken to safely lower the preterm birth rate in the State.

“This will be an introductory evening to address and inform on the scope of the problem in Tasmania and will endeavour to recruit the key stakeholders in women's health to assist in the implementation of the Initiative,” Dr Edwards explained.

“The obstetricians of Tasmania recognise the clinical urgency to address this public health problem, and as such, are aiming for Tasmania to be the second state after Western Australia to officially launch a state-wide preterm birth prevention initiative.

“This is an ambitious undertaking, however the health and future wellbeing of the babies of Tasmania, and hence future Tasmanians, are at stake.”

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Key areas for implementation include:

- The provision of appropriate ultrasound services for the accurate measurement and reporting of cervical length at the mid-trimester anatomy scan.
- Encouragement of smoking cessation (especially in women under the age of 20 who have the highest smoking rates; 1:3).
- Support for research and the promotion of the Initiative.
- Currently within Tasmania, progesterone is available through hospital and community pharmacies for women with a short cervix and/or those with a history of a prior preterm birth.
- In the South of the State, through the antenatal clinic at the Royal Hobart Hospital, women with risk factors for preterm birth (short cervix and/or previous preterm delivery before 34 weeks) are identified and referred for cervical surveillance through a dedicated clinic.
- Smoking cessation continues to be encouraged throughout the antenatal clinics at each of the maternity hospitals, and the rate of smoking in pregnancy amongst Tasmanian women has decreased from 23% in 2010, to 14% in 2016. However, in comparison to national figures, smoking cessation rates in pregnancy are lowest in Tasmania, with only 1 in 10 women no longer smoking after 20 weeks' gestation.

<sup>1</sup> Australia's mothers and babies 2016 – In Brief, AIHW 2018

### ENDS

**Media opportunity:** Drs Lindsay Edwards and Amanda Dennis are available for interview and follow-up media comment.

TAS – Dr Lindsay Edwards: 0402 446 790 | Dr Amanda Dennis: 0417 139 807

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### Background

The Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance is a national Alliance of clinical leaders, researchers, health departments, and communities working together to safely lower the rate of preterm birth in Australia.