

Media Release

Preterm birth pioneer named as the 2020 Senior Australian of the Year

Wednesday, 29 January 2020

In recognition of a life dedicated to saving and improving the lives of women, infants and families, WIRF'S Chief Scientific Director, Professor John Newnham, has been named as the 2020 Senior Australian of the Year.

Professor Newnham was recognised along with other national winners as part of the 2020 Australian of the Year Awards ceremony held at the National Arboretum in Canberra on the eve of Australia Day.

A Professor of Obstetrics, Professor Newnham has been instrumental in making Western Australia a hotspot for research and clinical excellence in pregnancy and life before birth. In, 1989, he founded and led the pioneering Raine Study; the world's first and most enduring pregnancy-focused lifetime cohort project.

In 2014, he developed the state-wide program for preventing preterm birth, The Whole Nine Months; a pioneering initiative which resulted in an 8% reduction in premature births across WA.

Every year more than 26,000 Australian babies are born too soon; tragically for some the day they're born is the day they die. In Western Australia alone, more than 3200 babies are born preterm each year.

Those born at the earliest gestational ages may suffer from severe problems such as cerebral palsy, chronic lung disease, blindness and developmental delay. Adding to the alarming preterm birth landscape in our country, rates of premature birth among Aboriginal mothers approximately double that of our non-Indigenous population.

Professor Newnham said that until recently it was thought that pre-term birth could not be prevented.

"However, we have shown in Western Australia that the rate can be safely reduced, improving the lives of many people," Prof Newnham explained.

In 2018, Professor Newnham would expand the WA initiative by founding the Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance – the world's first ever national program of its kind.

"There is no roadmap to follow, but we should all be very proud of the fact that Australia is now the first country to have such a national program," he said.

"The structure of the program has been built, the lead persons in each state and territory are in place, what we need to do now is to provide the support needed for national success and that includes financial support.

"It is now time for prevention of pre-term birth to become a national priority for Australia."

The win in the prestigious national awards comes on the back of Professor Newnham being honoured with the Australian Medical Association's (AMA) preeminent award in June 2019.

Professor Newnham was awarded the AMA WA's prestigious Hippocrates Award in recognition of his long term and long-lasting contributions to health and medicine in Western Australia.

ENDS



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Media opportunity: Professor John Newnham is available for media interviews. You can view his Researchers Profile here: <https://wirf.com.au/About-Us/Our-People/Researchers/John-Newnham>

Background: The Women & Infants Research Foundation is one of Australia's leading medical 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.