

The West Australian

WA Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative sees rate of premature babies drop at King Edward Memorial Hospital

Angela Pownall The West Australian Friday, 5 June 2020 2:00AM

The rate of babies born prematurely at WA's major maternity hospital has plunged 20 per cent in three years, thanks to a pioneering program to prevent early births.

The world-first initiative, which was founded by renowned obstetrician John Newnham in 2014, has particularly reduced premature births among women classed as low-risk.

But an 8 per cent decline in WA's overall preterm birth rate seen after the first year of the WA Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative has fallen away for reasons that are unclear.

Professor Newnham said it was disappointing WA's preterm birth rate had increased, but the initiative showed in King Edward Memorial Hospital that many premature births could be prevented.

"We've got a lot more work to do," he said.



Professor John Newnham. Credit: Michael Wilson/The West Australian

"The overall conclusion of this work is that preterm birth rates can be reduced with a co-ordinated program. It can be sustained if you keep the pressure on and WA is the first place in the world to have shown that."

But Professor Newnham warned we were "swimming against the tide" because of the growing rate of high-risk pregnancies.

Premature birth rates among low-risk women in the Kimberley fell by two-thirds.

Professor Newnham, director of the Women and Infants Research Foundation, said he believed strong midwifery care and free progesterone treatment was behind the dramatic reduction.

The initiative was the first globally to reduce preterm births across a population and was extended nationally in 2018.

A crucial feature is a mid-term test to measure a pregnant woman's cervix which, if too short, suggests a premature birth risk.

Amelia Hazelwood, who gave birth to Ella on Monday, said the test reassured her that she was at low risk of early birth.

The research, which is published in PLOS One today, is supported by governments, Telethon and philanthropy.



Newborn Ella Hazelwood was born at King Edward Memorial Hospital on 1 June, her due date. She is being held by her mother Amelia Hazelwood. Credit: Danella Bevis/The West Australian