



West Australian of the year – 2019 nominees

Prebirth pioneer changed medicine

Professor John Newnham's career has been driven by the belief that life before birth is important, and how children develop in the womb is critically important to the health they enjoy in life.

"When I came to King Edward Memorial Hospital as a student, I was told that life begins at birth and that medicine begins at birth," Professor Newnham, who is the head of obstetrics and gynaecology at the hospital and a nominee for West Australian of the Year, said.

"But I thought that what happens before birth must mean something.

"Prebirth medicine represented an unexplored continent for me, an idea that changed my life."

He graduated in 1976 from UWA, where he has been a professor since 1989, and has pioneered the field of prebirth medicine in Australia.

Eager to explore the world after his training at King Edward, Professor Newnham travelled to Africa, where he worked at a Zulu regional hospital under the leadership of King Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu.

"It had about twice the load of this hospital and I remember working all day and all night –

just operating," he said.

"I also recall a night when a young man came into the hospital with an assegai (a traditional Zulu spear) through his skull."

"It was pulled out and he discharged himself from hospital the next morning."

Professor Newnham then went to America to work in pre-birth medicine before returning to Australia with the intention of establishing it as a medical field here.

His subsequent research and work has had a profound impact on knowledge of pregnancy and birth.

One example is measuring the length of the cervix in mid-pregnancy.

The cervix check has now become standard practice for all mid-pregnancy scans in WA after research revealed a shortened cervix to be one of the key indicators of preterm birth.

On-the-spot treatment is now available at all maternity hospitals in the state – the first geographic region in the world to have made such tests standard.

Professor Newnham said preterm birth was the leading cause of death for children under five, and one of the leading causes of disability.

Researchers have also begun

to link preterm birth with behavioural problems at school age.

In Australia, 8% of children are born preterm, but the figure is 14% for indigenous Australians.

One of the most important facts that Professor Newnham attempts to convey is that 39 weeks is the absolute minimum for the length of a pregnancy, as long as there are no other medical reasons justifying earlier birth.

In 2014, he travelled with a small team across the state to visit every maternity hospital as part of the WA Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative, which lowered the rate of preterm birth in the state by 8% in its first year.

Professor Newnham now has federal government support to apply the program, known as the Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance, across Australia.

All of this, he said, had been achieved through King Edward Memorial Hospital and UWA.

"The days of needing to go to London or Los Angeles to make your career are over," he said.

"You can grow up in Perth, have an idea, and develop a world-leading organisation.

"You don't need to be anywhere else in the world."



Birth of an idea ... Professor John Newnham. Photo: Paul McGovern