

Preterm birth prevention program leads to 10% drop in Canberra's rates of early birth

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A significant reduction in the rate of preterm birth in Canberra is the latest major outcome for Australia's first program to reduce rates of early birth and its far reaching impacts.

Latest data released by Canberra Health Services has revealed a 10 per cent reduction in the rate of early birth at the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children (CHWC). The results come 15 months after CHWC joined the newly formed Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance – a national partnership to safely lower the rate of preterm birth in Australia.

Preterm birth is the leading cause of death and disability among children under five years of age in the developed world. According to WHO data, preterm birth was responsible for nearly 1 million deaths in 2015. In Australia alone, more than 26,000 babies are born preterm each year.

ACT Alliance Lead and Clinical Director in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Canberra Health Services, Associate Professor Boon Lim said the ACT program had learnt from the pioneering Initiative developed in WA by the Women & Infants Research Foundation 'The Whole Nine Months' to implement a multifaceted approach to preventing preterm labour.

"The aim of the Whole Nine Months ACT Program was to replicate the Alliance's screening and interventions with the hope of reducing the rate of preterm births of around 8 per cent," A/Prof. Lim explained.

Of babies born at the Canberra Hospital in 2018, seven per cent were premature, while that figure jumped to nine per cent when taking into account the whole of the ACT.

With generous support provided by the Liangis family, the program would also make the provision for an additional midwife at CHWC.

A/Prof. Lim said that learnings from the Alliance, coupled with consistency in medical care and emotional support, had underpinned success to-date.

"Research has shown that having a small team that provides continuity gives the best outcome. They see the same familiar faces in the clinic," A/Prof. Lim said.

Underpinning the importance of Midwifery Continuity of Care, The Whole Nine Months ACT engaged one midwife who would be at the heart of the program and would stay with each expectant mother for the duration of her pregnancy.

"Instead of finding out before it was too late that early labour is about to begin, the team is trained to take preventative steps — including performing a small procedure to narrow the cervix."

Chair of the Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance and 2020 Senior Australian of the Year, Professor John Newnham AM, said it was extremely encouraging to see such a sizable reduction in the rates of early birth in Australia's capital.

"Using our knowledge developed in Western Australia, we had always hoped that the Alliance would provide the mechanisms for states and territories to adapt, modify and tailor the existing WA-specific Initiative for introduction and successful implementation in each region."

“The results in Canberra are clear sign of an extremely well led program and how identifying, and appropriately resourcing, prevention strategies that are effective and feasible for a specific healthcare system, can result in a meaningful reduction in the rate of preterm birth. It is also clear that these results equate to significant savings for the health economy.”

Prof Newnham joined A/Prof. Lim in his call for a comprehensive Federal funding commitment which would enable further successes in every state and territory.

“We should all be very proud that Australia is now the first country to have a national program dedicated to preventing early birth.

“The structure of this 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.”

For more information about The Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance and the key interventions to prevent early birth, please visit: www.pretermalliance.com.au

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Media contact: Richie Hodgson, 0408 128 099, richie@wirf.com.au

Media opportunity: Professor John Newnham and Associate Professor Boon Lim are both available for follow up media comment.

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.

The Alliance was created out of the success of the Western Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative developed by the Women & Infants Research Foundation with its key practice points and public health campaign used to inform and shape a national approach to preventing preterm birth.

The Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance is proudly supported by the Women & Infants Research Foundation.