

Lockdown baby bliss

EXCLUSIVE ANGELA POWNALL

Experts believe that COVID-19 lockdown measures, such as working from home and better hand hygiene, have led to a big fall in very premature births.

In a pioneering Australian study, Perth researchers will analyse rates of early preterm birth across the nation after reports of falls of up to 90 per cent in other countries during lockdown.

Perth obstetrician John Newnham, founder and chair of the Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance which is leading the study, said lockdown could result in less work stress for pregnant women, while increased handwashing could reduce bacterial infections causing premature birth.

"We don't realise how stressful work is," he said. "You make your way home. You're exhausted. You're 26 weeks pregnant, and you're doing this."

The chief scientific director of the Perth-based Women & Infants Research Foundation, Professor Newnham said spending more time at home with family could also have made women feel more reassured. "Another possibility is it is handwashing and it's not being exposed to other people's bacteria," he said.

"It's horrific to think about. You can't even begin to think that could be true, but 70 per cent of very early preterm births have an infectious origin."

A study into the effect of COVID-19 lockdown on premature births in Denmark found a 91 per cent decrease in extremely premature births, that is babies born before 28 weeks gestation, during four weeks in March and April this year, compared with previous years.

Research at a hospital in Limerick, Ireland, found an unprecedented 73 per cent reduction in premature birth of babies with very low birth weight in the lockdown period earlier this year.

The Irish researchers listed many possible reasons for the reduction, including working from home, less work stress, less physical strain related to work and commuting, better opportunities for rest and sleep, more partner support and reduced exposure to infections.

Professor Newnham said the impact on premature births applied to a specific window in gestational age of 24 to 30 weeks.

"There are some very important lessons for us. I don't know what they are, but they're going to be there," he said. "It could be just in this particular window of time, women should lock themselves down a bit. I don't know, that's speculation."

Professor Newnham, who works at King Edward Memorial Hospital, said he was not aware of a big fall in premature births at the maternity hospital during lockdown, possibly because WA's restrictions were not as severe as other areas.



Picture: AFL Photos

Bennell sent home to WA after COVID breach

Melbourne's Harley Bennell has been suspended for four matches and will be sent home to WA after breaching the AFL's strict COVID-19 protocols.

In what has been described by the club as a "selfish act", Bennell left the hub and attempted to visit "an unauthorised residence" without AFL approval, resulting in a \$50,000 fine for the Demons.

Melbourne confirmed last night that it was "extremely disappointed" in Bennell's behaviour. "This is a selfish act by Harley and a clear breach of the AFL's protocols," Melbourne chief executive Gary Pert said.

"He has made a very poor decision, which is incredibly disappointing. He has not only put himself, his teammates and the competition at risk but he has failed to live up to the values of the Melbourne Football Club."

"Harley knew the rules. He understands the extent of his actions and is incredibly remorseful for his behaviour."

"He has made a terrible mistake and has been punished accordingly."

The troubled ex-Docker was involved in a Saturday drinking session in Queensland, breaching the hub rules. Mr Pert said Melbourne would accept the penalty handed down by the AFL and would provide assistance to Bennell, who is from Pinjarra.

The breach comes only weeks after Richmond pair, fellow WA export Sydney Stack and Callum Coleman-Jones, were sent home by the Queensland Government and suspended for 10 weeks after a fight outside a Gold Coast strip club.

App for socially distanced pain diagnosis \$6m pledge for vaccine

Aged-care providers will be able to keep using facial recognition technology that can identify pain until June next year, thanks to additional funding.

The PainChek mobile app is providing facilities with a way to score pain levels in real-time while social distancing.

The app, which assesses "micro-expressions" to identify the severity of pain a person is

experiencing, was given \$3 million of Federal funding earlier this year in a bid to help aged-care staff detect residents' pain without getting too close. Today, that funding has been boosted by \$2m and extended for six months — allowing aged-care providers to use the app for free until June 2021.

Since the app was first launched, more than 180,000

PainChek assessments have been conducted on more than 16,000 residents living with dementia, who often cannot communicate their pain.

PainChek chief executive Philip Daffas said the technology allowed providers to measure pain levels "from a socially safe distance". Of Australia's 844 coronavirus deaths, 629 have been in aged care.

The Federal Government is throwing its support behind the race for a COVID-19 vaccine — with \$6 million for three more Australian trials.

The funding will be shared between the University of Melbourne — which is developing two vaccines — and the University of Sydney.

It comes after the Government signed a \$1.7 billion agreement

with two pharmaceutical companies for the supply and production of more than 80 million vaccine doses.

One of the vaccines is being developed by the University of Queensland, which had already received \$5m in funding.

The other is being developed by the University of Oxford and would be distributed through drug company Astra Zeneca.