Trailblazer of Aboriginal health honoured with prestigious award

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The founder of the longest and largest study of Aboriginal people in Australia has been named as the recipient of the highest award offered by the Menzies School of Health Research, the Menzies Medallion.

Dr Sue Sayers, a long-serving Darwin paediatrician and Menzies Principal Research Fellow, was recently presented with the award in recognition of her outstanding contributions to improving Aboriginal health for more than 20 years.

Working as a paediatrician at the Royal Darwin Hospital (RDH) from 1981, Dr Sayers was struck by the high frequency of low birth-weight of Aboriginal babies.

From 1987-1990, she recruited 686 Aboriginal babies born at RDH, and launched the Aboriginal Birth Cohort (ABC) Study; an important and imaginative project assessing the effect of early life factors on later physical and mental health, and to examine which factors modify these effects across the life course.

The study aims to identify early those most at risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular, kidney and mental health and help target intervention strategies at the most appropriate age.

The ABC study has been highly successful, resulting in over 30 publications in peer-reviewed journals, and supported by grants from National Health and Medical Research Council, the Heart Foundation, the Colonial Foundation, Channel 7 Foundation SA, CVL Pfizer, and an NT Research and Innovation Award. Wave-4 of the study is set to be launched in August 2013.

In presenting the award, Menzies founding Director and current Executive Director of the Menzies Foundation, Professor John Mathews AM said Dr Sayers had left an indelible mark on the landscape of Aboriginal health.

“It was a particular pleasure for me to present this award to Dr Sayers and to pay tribute to her great foresight in launching this ground-breaking study as a volunteer with Menzies in 1987,” he said.

“Her important results have been fed-back to the Aboriginal communities involved, as well as being published in the academic literature. She is to be congratulated for her outstanding contributions to understanding of the long-term effects of low birth-weight in Aboriginal communities.”

In accepting the Medallion, Dr Sayers thanked the Menzies Board and her colleagues for their recognition with this highly coveted award.

“It is fitting that Professor John Matthews presented me with the award as it is highly likely that this study would not have developed without his input at the beginning,” Dr Sayers said.

“I am particularly pleased that the next phase of the ABC study, under the able leadership of Gurmeet Singh, is about to start and I hope the continuing study of this cohort will help tease out the complexities of the causes of chronic disease in Aboriginal people and provide evidence for interventions that improve Aboriginal health and wellbeing.”

Chairman of Menzies’ Governing Board, Professor Simon Maddocks said he was delighted with the selection of Dr Sayers as the recipient of the 2013 Medallion.
“Dr Sayers has made a significant contribution to improving the health of Aboriginal people over a considerable period of time and been instrumental in developing Menzies partnerships with communities throughout Northern Australia,” he said.

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**Background:** Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) are Australia’s only Medical Research Institute dedicated to improving Indigenous health and wellbeing. We have a 27-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies work at the frontline and collaborate broadly, partnering with over 60 Indigenous communities across Northern Australia to create resources, grow local skills, and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.