

Menzies ear and hearing health program wins \$2.5 million in ‘research excellence’ funding

Friday, 17 October 2014

A leading ear and hearing health collaborative research program led by the Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) was today declared a ‘Centre of Research Excellence (CRE)’ and awarded funding of \$2.5 million over five years.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) have announced the Menzies CRE in Indigenous Children’s Healthy Ears (ICHEAR) as one of a select few centres of research excellence Australia-wide.

Professor Amanda Leach will lead the CRE which aims to significantly improve ear and hearing health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.

“Indigenous children have the highest reported rates of otitis media (OM), commonly known as middle ear infection, and burst eardrums in the world,” Professor Leach said.

In remote communities OM and significant hearing loss establishes in almost all babies within weeks of birth. Unlike the painful episodes experienced by non-Indigenous children, research has revealed it is generally not as painful in Indigenous children, so the disease progresses undetected and often results in perforated ear drums.

In 2013, 86 per cent of Indigenous children under 3 years of age had OM, and 14 per cent had a perforated ear drum (compared to 0.1 per cent of non-Indigenous children). Elsewhere in Australia, Indigenous children also have much higher rates of OM than their non-Indigenous peers, but very little research has addressed how best to prevent and treat OM and hearing loss in urban Indigenous children.

Professor Leach pointed to long-term middle ear damage a key contributor to hearing loss which impacts on the development of speech and language, and is linked to educational disadvantage, communication and behavioural problems.

“Through this CRE our internationally recognised research collaboration will expand its multidisciplinary program to address the many questions around what works best to prevent and treat OM and hearing loss,” she said.

“The CRE team includes high calibre Indigenous investigators who will mentor and build Indigenous research capacity and drive research translation to make a real impact on Indigenous child health.

“A key outcome of this project will be the development of a national strategy for OM and hearing loss prevention research, focussed on Indigenous leadership, research excellence and innovation.”

Menzies Director, Professor Alan Cass said the announcement was a huge boon to the Institute for a critical and long-standing area of its research.

“Getting the formal recognition as a Centre of Research Excellence is great news for the team of researchers and a great encouragement for the people and communities who work with us in trying to find real solutions to improve the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians,” Prof Cass said.

“Importantly, this CRE will have a key role in continuing to build Menzies’ research capacity for the future and inform Australian policy and practice regarding the best strategies for further closing of the gap in social and educational disadvantage that is linked to childhood OM and hearing loss.”

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Media note:

Professor Amanda Leach is available for interviews upon request. View here researcher profile here: http://www.menzies.edu.au/page/Our_People/Researchers/Amanda_Leach/

Menzies Background

Menzies School of Health Research is Australia’s leading Medical Research Institute dedicated to improving Indigenous health and wellbeing. We have a 29-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, partnering with over 60 Indigenous communities across Northern and Central Australia. We collaborate to create resources, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.