

## National boost for new Indigenous and tropical health research

19 October 2012

The Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) has been awarded federal funding for 12 competitive grants and fellowships to help improve outcomes for disadvantaged populations in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

Australia's peak body for supporting health and medical research, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), made the announcement today as part of a national funding round.

Director Designate of Menzies, Professor Alan Cass said the result highlighted the Australian Government's commitment to research, particularly in the area of Indigenous health.

"This is a vital sign of support for research to improve the health of Indigenous Australians and for research on tropical health both in Australia and overseas.

"The projects funded range from a 25 year study on Aboriginal babies to identify those most at risk of chronic diseases, to improving systems and quality of care for Indigenous cancer patients at the primary health care level, to using DNA technology to better understand the potentially deadly tropical disease melioidosis.

"This research will work to break the cycle of disadvantage and to develop innovative approaches to improving health and wellbeing," Prof Cass said.

NHMRC announced more than \$9 million funding for Menzies including:

- 7 grants valued at \$7,417,648
- 4 fellowships valued at \$1,503,453
- An equipment grant for \$83,733

Prof Cass said the funding ensures Menzies will continue as an institute of scientific excellence and as one of Australia's leading medical research institutes.

"More than 46 per cent of the Menzies grant applications were selected for funding through a highly competitive national process, more than doubling the Australian average success rate of 20 per cent.

Prof Cass said the announcement also reflected the quality of the research ideas and the strong history of engagement of the research staff at Menzies.

"Importantly, the project by Professor Bart Currie, which will use DNA technology to look at why melioidosis is increasing in urban areas in the Northern Territory, was rated in the top 0.1 per cent of all projects nationally. This highlights the calibre of our researchers and our research here at Menzies."

The grants awarded to Menzies include:

- **\$2,240,417 - Aboriginal Birth Cohort (ABC) Study Wave 4**  
*Chief Investigator – Dr Gurmeet Singh*

This grant will provide funding to continue the Australian Aboriginal Birth Cohort, which was established more than 25 years ago to identify those most at risk of chronic diseases (diabetes, cardiovascular, renal and mental health) and help develop intervention strategies. The study will look at early life events of Aboriginal babies, beginning in the womb, to later physical and mental health.

Grant's cont'd:

- **\$1,986,095 - Better use of vaccines for improved ear and hearing health of Indigenous children**  
*Chief Investigator – Dr Amanda Leach*  
Very few Indigenous children in remote communities have healthy ears or lungs; almost 20% have eardrum perforations. The associated hearing loss causes educational disadvantage with life long impacts on quality of life. This research will involve a randomized controlled trial to help determine if the combination of two existing pneumococcal vaccines is more effective than single vaccines in treating Indigenous children
- **\$532,630 - Pathophysiology and treatment of malaria and other tropical infectious diseases prevalent in our region**  
*Practitioner Fellowship, Professor Nicholas Anstey*  
This fellowship will extend Prof Anstey's ground-breaking research towards the better treatment of malaria and other tropical infectious diseases prevalent in our region.
- **\$582,392 - Linking genomics of Burkholderia pseudomallei to melioidosis**  
*Chief Investigator - Professor Bart Currie*  
The Darwin Prospective Melioidosis Study has led to improved therapy and public health initiatives. New technology to sequence whole bacterial genomes provides an opportunity to determine why urban melioidosis is increasing and to analyse this unique 22+ year set of bacteria and their linked patient data to find the important bacterial factors, forming a foundation for future diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines.

Prof Cass said the awarding of four fellowships will allow senior researchers to continue a career in science and help retain highly skilled staff in the Top End.

“The funding will go towards research projects which will help reduce the incidence of chronic conditions such as kidney disease found predominantly in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.”

The fellowships awarded to Menzies include:

- **Dr Elif Ekinci** - Detection and assessment of kidney disease in Indigenous Australians & Detection and assessment of kidney disease in Indigenous Australians (Early Career Fellowship)
- **Dr Josh Hanson** - Optimisation of the supportive care of adults with severe falciparum malaria (Early Career Fellowship)
- **Prof Nick Anstey** (Practitioner Fellowship - as above)

In separate announcements recently, Menzies also had success in August when securing NHMRC funding of \$5 million over five years for its two Centres for Research Excellence in lung health and cancer research.

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**Background:**

Menzies School of Health Research is the national leader in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. It is the only medical research institute in the Northern Territory and the only one in Australia with a major focus on Indigenous health. Menzies has more than 300 staff working in over 60 communities in Central and Northern Australia, as well as developing countries in the region. Menzies is also a significant contributor to health education and research training.