

Researcher awarded half a million dollars for pioneering Indigenous youth study

26 July 2012

Menzies School of Health researcher Dr Kate Senior has been awarded more than \$500,000 for a Future Fellowship, to examine health and wellbeing among Indigenous adolescents.

Announced today by Chris Evans, Federal Minister for Tertiary Education, on behalf of the Australian Research Council, the Northern Territory (NT) researcher's project *Youth Futures* will run for five years with a budget of \$564, 528.

Dr Senior says researchers have long focused on infant and child development, but up until now, neglected a thorough investigation of adolescence.

"There is so little known about Indigenous adolescent lives, yet it's such an extraordinary stage of people's lives because there's incredibly rapid development. It's a period of high risk-taking, obviously, but also enormous creativity.

"As scientists we really haven't focused on what is happening during this period, and what affects short- and long-term wellbeing. We're working from a dearth of evidence and knowledge, despite the fact that young people aged 12-24 make up 20% of the Territory's population," Dr Senior says.

"*Youth Futures* is about increasing that knowledge as well as the buy-in and capacity of young people to be involved in research and solutions that raise their wellbeing."

Dr Senior plans to first report on the concerns of NT Indigenous adolescents through developing a NT health and wellbeing survey. The second phase of her project will propose strategies to best improve health, social engagement and psychological flourishing.

"We'll be looking at wellbeing from the widest possible perspective: housing, aspirations for employment, how to engage with education system and more," she says.

While little is known about wellbeing among this group, Senior says current statistics are discouraging:

- In 2008, Indigenous adolescents in the NT had a 120% higher rate of Sexually Transmitted Infections and a 700% higher rate of teen pregnancy when compared with the national average.
- In the second quarter of 2012, the daily average number of juveniles held in detention in the NT was 50, an increase of 85% (23) from the same time last year, and 98% (49) of those were Indigenous.

Dr Senior's fellowship is the second such grant won by a Territory scientist since Future Fellowships were first launched in 2009. Menzies School of Health Research's Dr Ross Baillie was the last NT recipient in 2010.

"They are extremely competitive and hard to get," says Senior of her successful proposal, almost six months in the making. "I've worked towards this for 20 years. It's great to know that Menzies is considered to be in this league of research."

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Image available on request: High resolution portrait, Dr Kate Senior

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 NT 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. Its major research programs include infectious diseases, chronic diseases, environmental health, health services research, social determinants of health, mental health, and international health. Menzies is largely funded through competitive research grants provided by the Australian Government's National Health and Medical Research Council, in addition to funding from the Northern Territory Government.