



MEDIA RELEASE

Progress report on research into dementia in urban Aboriginal Australians

Two of the chief investigators in a research project aimed at determining the extent and causes of dementia in urban Aboriginal people in NSW will present an early progress report at a conference at the beginning of next month.

Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver and Professor Tony Broe from the Prince of Wales Medical Research Unit will give a plenary address to a conference in Broken Hill organised by the NSW branch of the Australian Association of Gerontology.

Their subject is “Ageing, health transition and dementia in Aboriginal people”. Their presentation, on Wednesday 1 April, will be followed by a panel discussion.

The talks will focus on the “Koori Growing Old Well Study”, a research project that has attracted funding of almost \$1.5 million from the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Professor Broe said there was a pressing need to examine the prevalence or frequency of dementia in the majority of Aboriginal people from urban-dwelling communities such as in New South Wales, where few Aboriginal communities are “remote”.

“We have undertaken this project because of our lack of knowledge about dementia in Aboriginal people and the recent and the unexpected finding of high rates of dementia, around four times the non-Indigenous rate, in the remote Kimberley Aboriginal community, in people aged 45 years and older.

“Beyond that, we hope to identify both risk factors and protective factors for successful ageing, as well as for dementia, in non-remote Aboriginal people.” Professor Broe said, “We know a lot about Aboriginal health in general and about early onset, high rates and early mortality from chronic diseases in Aboriginal people.

“However we also know that some good things are happening. Young Aboriginal populations are growing rapidly and the number of ‘older’ Aboriginal people, aged 45 to 64 years, is now rising.

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“Dementia is a disorder of older people and there is a pressing need to examine the burden of dementia in communities representing the majority of Aboriginal people who live in non-remote or urban settings.”

The project will involve recruiting 700 people, 45 years of age and over, using a sampling technique, in six metropolitan and regional town communities as well as another 700 people, who may be a relative of each of the people selected or a community member who knows them well.

The research team expects that they will detect a possible dementia in 80 of the 700 people being recruited, and that a further 70 will have cognitive impairment.

Among the questions the project seeks to answer are:

- What proportion of Aboriginal people has a dementia?
- What types of dementia occur amongst Aboriginal people?
- What is the meaning of “dementia” for Aboriginal people themselves?
- What are the causes of dementia in Aboriginal communities?
- What problems does dementia cause?

Professor Broe said, “the project also will aim to examine normal or ‘healthy’ ageing in Aboriginal people”.

“A very important aspect of the study is that it will build capacity in the local Aboriginal communities in dementia recognition and care and in recognition and prevention of risk factors for dementia, by employing and training Aboriginal workers as research assistants.”

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For further information contact Sharon Wall, Secretary, Aboriginal Ageing Committee 0419 849101 or Professor Julie Byles 0409 459 865, the NSW President of the AAG who will be chair of the conference.

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