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OBESITY IN KIDS: NEW RESEARCH FUNDED IN W.A.

Childhood obesity is increasingly a problem for Australia, and a Perth-based research team has won funding from the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI) to investigate the best ways of helping parents to prevent it happening to their children.

Professor Donna Cross, from Edith Cowan University in Perth, said overweight and obesity rates in Australian children today are among the highest in the developed world with figures increasing steadily, especially among disadvantaged young children.

"It's a very serious health issue and this is the one of the first opportunities we've had in Australia to focus on what parents need to help them reduce overweight and obesity in their young children," she said.

Children who are obese are more negatively stigmatised than almost any other social group; they are more likely to be targets of peer bullying, have greater feelings of isolation and depression, lower self esteem, and higher levels of school absenteeism, Professor Cross said.

The research will ask stakeholders and parents about models of dealing with obesity in children, which has grown at an extraordinary rate in recent years. Australia is now on track to have similar levels to the United States – where about 50 per cent of children are overweight.

"We are trying to find acceptable and appropriate ways to encourage parents to take action to keep their young children's weight in a healthy range. Being overweight at six years of age is a good indicator of the likelihood of being overweight in adulthood," she said.

Professor Cross' project is one of 12 projects around the nation funded by APHCRI, which is based at ANU, in its second major funding round for 2005.

The Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute was set up as part of a Federal Government strategy to improve the knowledge base in primary health care policy. This is the Institute's fourth funding round of research into primary health care.

Each of the 12 projects will be funded for 12 months with results expected in September next year. Funding in this round totalled \$1,724,200.

APHCRI Director, Professor Nicholas Glasgow, said the Institute was taking an innovative approach to research. "APHCRI will bring policy makers and researchers together in the early stages of the their work to refine research questions and improve the collaboration between the two diverse groups," he said.

"This aims to make research more relevant to policy formulation in primary health care."

The new stream of research would be able to react quickly to relevant policy questions, with an end result of improving health care outcomes for Australians, he said.

APHCRI Research Advisory Board Chairman, Professor John Marley, congratulated the successful applicants.

"It's great to see so many researchers from all over Australia come together in this body of work. I look forward to seeing the results of their research and the development of APHCRI's approach, bringing the research and policy communities together."

Other projects funded include:

- A study of successful models of comprehensive primary health care in Australia and internationally;
- A study of successful models of Aboriginal primary health care; and

- Research into whether care in other chronic disease areas, like diabetes, could be used as a model in mental health.