

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



Respiratory study targets North-West children

North-West Tasmania primary school children aged 6-8 years will be asked to participate in a study by a University of Tasmania researcher to find out if rural children are more likely to develop breathing difficulties related to asthma and allergies.

Dr Henrich Weber, a paediatrician with the NW Regional Hospital in Burnie and lecturer at the UTAS Rural Clinical School (RCS), has secured \$35,000 in funding from the North West Medical Research Trust (a subsidiary of the Clifford Craig Medical Research Trust) to replicate the International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood (ISAAC) to identify the number of children affected by asthma and allergy in rural North-West Tasmania.

Collaborating with Professor Hayden Walters from Clifford Craig and Professor Shaymali Dharmage from the University of Melbourne, Dr Weber aims to get a better idea of how common respiratory problems are in local rural communities and look at some causes.

Letters to NW primary school principals have been sent out this week, coinciding with National Rural Health Week, inviting them to help find children who would like to join in this study- with the consent of parents and guardians.

Parents will be asked about children's symptoms and treatment and children will have their lung tested by blowing into a spirometer, a machine that can test the how well the lungs work by blowing into it.

These tests will be conducted by appropriately trained and supervised staff at the University of Tasmania Rural Clinical School in Burnie over a six-month period.

Dr Weber said that the majority of asthma studies come from children living in towns, so not much is known about childhood asthma in rural settings.

"This information will inform how we organise our services for children with asthma and find out if there are any local issues that make it worse here on the North West coast," he said.

“Asthma and allergies are increasing worldwide and childhood asthma is a significant issue for children, as well as costly to the Health service - 606 million dollars (1.2 per cent of national health care expenditure) was spent on asthma in Australia in 2004-05.

“One recent telephone survey showed asthma was more common in children in poorer families , those who had single mothers or lived in families whose parents smoke– these families can all be found on Tasmania’s North-West, West Coast and King Island.”

Dr Weber was instrumental in setting up the paediatric respiratory asthma clinic at the NW Regional Hospital four years ago.

The specialised clinic conducts lung function testing and allergy skin testing, and with the assistance of an asthma nurse educator is now providing outreach clinics to West Coast and King Island communities.

NWMRF chairman Peter Mancell said that it is exciting to know that a local clinician has taken the time to submit a project for consideration and been accepted as a worthy recipient of the funds raised by the local community.

“It is one of our goals to provide the opportunity for local clinicians to undertake research locally for the benefit of local community health,” he said.

“We really are quite excited to know that the money will be spent right here and that the opportunity to conduct research will help attract and keep highly qualified clinicians in Tasmania’s North-West.”

MEDIA OPPORTUNITY:

UTAS researcher Dr Heinrich Weber and NWMRF chairman Peter Mancell are both available for interviews in Burnie this afternoon (TODAY November 12).

Please contact UTAS RCS Media Officer, Lana Best, for more information on: 0417 978 025.

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