

# WA Centre for Health & Ageing Research News

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## Fat protects older men from Dementia

Throughout our lives we have been warned about the dangers of being overweight and yes this is true in childhood, adolescence and during adulthood. There are countless studies that have shown the adverse affects of being overweight; an increase risk of diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular events and some cancers. And not surprisingly, being overweight reduces life expectancy. The outlook is not promising for overweight people, they normally die younger than normal weight people. However, new research has revealed that being overweight when you are elderly can prove to be beneficial. "This statement seems counter-intuitive," says Research Director Osvaldo Almeida.

"Let me give you an example, you would think that I am being unrealistic if I were to suggest that a 72-year old man should be as strong or as fast as a 30-year old man. However, for some reason that I cannot fully understand, policy makers, health professionals and the population at large seem to expect that the body composition of a 72-year old man should be the same as that of a 30-year old man."

These two disparate views of the world cannot be reconciled for the simple reason that body shape and composition change

with time. As a result, the body of a 72-year old will never be like the body of a 30-year old. Moreover, some of the physiological changes that take place with increasing age may be adaptive rather than harmful. The amount and distribution of fat in older people is different from younger people and being 'different' is not necessarily 'bad'. New research shows that the 10-year risk of dementia is lowest for men in their 70s who are slightly overweight lower even than the risk for older men who have normal weight. In fact, we also found that the 10-year risk of death was lowest in the slightly overweight group.



# Message from the Director

With summer upon us and Christmas just around the corner, I would like to take this opportunity to extend warm holiday wishes to all of you. This year, despite the world's economic downturn our Centre has had an extremely productive year. Your generous gifts made it possible for our researchers to add many pieces to the puzzle of the problems of ageing, in particular, in helping prevent dementia and depression.

The Centre launched e-Ageing an interactive online education tool, which is going from strength to strength. It has been used by various health professionals and students to augment their knowledge on ageing and related diseases.

We recently welcomed back dementia expert Professor David Ames, from the University of Melbourne. He delivered a very entertaining lecture and shared with us his wealth of knowledge about Alzheimer's disease and his recent research findings. He reminded us of the importance of research and its real benefits to people with dementia. For

those of you, who missed his talk and would like to listen, visit our website [www.wacha.org.au](http://www.wacha.org.au) to access his talk.

Lastly, I would like to thank the team of researchers and my colleagues for their commitment, dedication and hard work. Together, this year we have achieved some fantastic results. I encourage all of them to enjoy the Christmas break, as we will be working tirelessly looking for cures, treatments and ways to prevent dementia, depression and other age related diseases in 2012.

I very much appreciate your ongoing support and wish to thank you for joining us on our research journey this year. We look forward to sharing our research results with you next year and for many years to come.

Warmest wishes for the festive season,



Professor Leon Flicker  
Director



## Some Good News for flood victims



The remote north west community of Warmun (200km south of Kununurra), was devastated by floods earlier this year. The community had to be evacuated to Kununurra. The Centre has been working closely with Warmun Aboriginal community for a number of years on its Kimberley Healthy Adults project. On hearing this devastating news Natasha Watson, the Kimberley Healthy Adults Project coordinator, decided to lend a hand and called on colleagues, friends and supporters to donate unwanted clothes and bed linen. She was overwhelmed with

the response and was kept busy packing and sorting through piles of donations.

A big thank to all those who were able to assist Natasha, thanks, also goes to the Red Cross who organised the transport of the clothes from Perth to Kununurra. The Warmun community was touched by the response they got from their friends in Perth. I am pleased to report that the community has since moved back to Warmun and are, working hard to get their lives back to normal.

## Centre Welcomes Cambridge Endeavour Research Fellow

WACHA recently welcomed Cambridge PhD student Matthew Prina. After securing an Endeavour Research Fellowship Matthew chose to come to Perth to work with Research Director Professor Almeida. He is researching the epidemiology of common mental disorders in later life and is particularly interested in our large Health in Men's study. He has been involved in similar studies in the UK and the Netherlands. He is investigating if there is an association between depression and general hospital admissions.

# The pursuit of happiness: an opinion piece

As research assistant, Jo Sleeman approached her 60th birthday she looked towards her own future and after visiting numerous residential care facilities and speaking to countless residents, she got thinking – What were the key factors that lead to content and happy residents? As she recorded her observations she found herself forming a personal opinion as to what made some facilities welcoming, warm and pleasant to visit. The residents' feelings of contentment also varied within and between facilities. So she began to note those factors which the residents identified as contributors to their contentment level, as well as reflecting on the factors influencing her own impressions of facilities.

She identified the following factors as being important to the contentment of residents: design of building and size of facility; leadership style of management; expression of needs and wants directly or through advocate; choice; and,



elimination of boredom through involvement in meaningful activity.

She found that company was not the same as companionship; entertaining is

not engaging; existence is not living; and, most importantly, mobility is a precious asset that needs to be retained.

Visit [wacha.org.au](http://wacha.org.au) to read the full article.

## Do you go with your head or your heart?

Congestive heart failure has often been associated with impaired cognitive function but to date there has been little hard evidence to support these observational studies. Neither has a study shown if these observed changes progress overtime.

Congestive heart failure indicates when the heart is no longer able to pump enough oxygen rich blood to the rest of the body. As the heart's pumping action is lost, blood may back up in other areas of the body and fluid builds up in the lungs, liver, gastrointestinal tract, and the arms and legs.

Researchers set out to find hard evidence to prove that congestive heart failure compromises a person's intellectual function by affecting attention, memory, visuospatial skills and reasoning. This was the first study to monitor changes in cognitive function over 2 years.

The researchers found that people with congestive heart failure experienced very subtle cognitive decline over two years when compared to people who were cardiologically healthy.



## Young doctor joins outcomes research team

The value of research is not lost on Dr Elizabeth Wong as the geriatrician decides to dedicate the next few years of her life as a full-time PhD student to develop her skills in the field of research. Dr Wong has recently joined the WA Centre for Health and Ageing and will be investigating the effects of various biomarkers on age-related health outcomes.

*"As a practising geriatrician, I recognise how crucial it is that our seniors take proper care of themselves. Some of my older patients have said to me, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself." I always replied "It's never too late to start"."*

*"As a clinician, I realise the importance of exploring ways to stay in good health and prevent diseases like Cancer, stroke and dementia from occurring in the first place. That's why I have turned to research. I would like to provide my patients with more than just comfort, support and my professional opinion. I want to be involved in providing people with hope, hope for a cure, hope for a healthier old age. The pinnacle of our healthcare system and delivery is practising evidence-based medicine, and I would like to be involved in finding that evidence through research."*

# WACHA joins global research network

WACHA has been selected to join five hundred other international centres of excellence, who are dedicated to researching health and ageing issues.

The International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG) has established a global network, where they can promote the highest levels of achievement in ageing research and training worldwide. WACHA, together with IAGG's international network, hopes to enhance the quality of life and well being of all people as they experience personal and social ageing. Research Director Professor Osvaldo P. Almeida was thrilled on hearing the news.

"The membership of this international network recognises the quality of the research effort that we have been running at WACHA. It will also enable our researchers to enhance their collaborations to the worldwide effort to produce information that is relevant to the health of our community. It really is great news for the Centre and for Western Australia!" he said.

# Testosterone no 'fountain of youth'

A study of older Perth men has revealed that testosterone might not be the fountain of youth, as once thought. The Centre's researchers set out to explore the association between testosterone levels and causes of death. They were able to confirm that men with low testosterone are more likely to die of cardiovascular disease. However the surprising finding was that these low testosterone levels were not linked to death from other diseases. Previous studies had suggested that men with low testosterone levels were more likely to die earlier. Some researchers have argued that testosterone therapy might improve longevity. These results suggest that low testosterone is a risk factor only for cardiovascular disease, and does not provide support for more widespread use of testosterone.

Testosterone therapy is available in Australia only for men whose levels have been found to be low on testing and for those who are experiencing symptoms of testosterone deficiency. Zoë Hyde, the study's lead author said it would be premature to recommend testosterone therapy to prevent cardiovascular disease. Although our study suggests that preventing testosterone deficiency might have some health benefits, we need to first conduct clinical trials of testosterone therapy to see if these findings are real, and to also properly evaluate the risks of therapy.

The research forms part of the Health In Men Study (HIMS) that has been following a group of men living in Perth, Western Australia since 1996 and is the largest study of ageing men in Australia. It involves community-dwelling men aged in their 70s and 80s. The researchers would like to extend their gratitude to the men who participated in the study.

## Make someone's day and donate today!

Our researchers are finding ways to extend healthy life, helping to advance effective disease prevention for everyone. The results of their work touch many lives every day. If you can help our Centre to help make a vast improvement in more people's lives, donate today. To find out more about the Centre's research advances visit [www.wacha.org.au](http://www.wacha.org.au)

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How I can include the WA Centre for Health & Ageing in my Will

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