



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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MEDIA STATEMENT

JOONDALUP STUDY PROMPTS NEW SCHOOL SCIENCE PROGRAM

WA researchers involved in planning the Joondalup Family Health Study have today launched a program aimed at helping revolutionise the teaching of genetics and biotechnology in WA schools.

Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) Professor Lyle Palmer, also the head of the Joondalup Family Health Study team, has been working closely with Associate Professor Grady Venville and Dr Vaile Dawson from the School of Education at Edith Cowan University Joondalup (ECU) to create this new program.

The trio says it's vital that the teaching and learning of genetics and genomic biotechnology in schools is brought up-to-speed so that WA can lead the way in these important new research areas.

Their campaign was kicked off today with a forum for more than 100 high school science students and teachers from both government and private schools in the City of Joondalup.

The forum, held at Ocean Reef Senior High School, was opened by State Education Minister Ljiljanna Ravlich. The program is in line with State Government plans to focus on developing new biotechnology industries in WA, and update the science curriculum in WA schools.

Professor Palmer said today's forum was the first step in a concerted effort by health and educational professionals to boost students' knowledge of genetics and how it relates to new medical and genomic technologies.

"We know that if WA and Australia are to stay at the forefront of medical research into the future then we need to radically transform what our school students are taught about genetics and genetic technology," he said.

"Advances in this area move at the speed of light and we need to match the pace or risk current and future generations of Western Australians getting left behind."

Professor Palmer said these sorts of programs were important not only because future doctors and scientists would come from our school system, but also because it was only through improved education that society could have informed debate on important issues such as stem cell research.

"We are in a unique position in WA to engage a whole spectrum of academic and government professionals – including those in the Departments of Health and Education – in a coordinated effort to make WA science education amongst the best in the world," he said.

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The forum was told about plans for the Joondalup Family Health Study and students were involved in an interactive discussion focusing on community health, new medical technologies, the genomics revolution, and the role of medical research.

Associate Professor Grady Venville said keeping students up-to-speed with the world of genetics was critical, with research revealing some disturbing trends.

“Our recent research here in WA has shown students know very little about genetics – for example many believe computers, cars and cartoon characters have DNA – and so what is clear is that there is an urgent need to improve their understanding of this increasingly important field,” she said.

“We see no better way to help start this process than to bring school teachers together with scientists working on the Joondalup Family Health Study so that students can learn by engaging in cutting-edge science happening in their own backyard.”

The group will continue its push to improve genetics education by holding other school-based events, by expanding upon schools-based research programs in the City of Joondalup, and by conducting cutting-edge educational research that will provide best-practice teaching models that can be rolled out to schools across the country.

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**For more information please contact:
Natalie Papadopoulos, WAIMR Media Consultant on M: 0407 984 435**