The Ageing Research Team from the Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute (POWMRI) and the Ageing Research Centre at Prince of Wales Hospital, have received an NHMRC Project Grant of $1,482,000. The Project aims to examine ageing in urban Aboriginal Australians and to determine the burden of dementia in this group.

We have named this Project the Koori Growing Old Well Study and we plan to carry it out over a three year period between 2008 and 2011. We will be taking a life cycle approach to include the study of healthy ageing and physical ill-health as well as the frequency of cognitive impairment and dementia. To do this we will be assessing around 700 people aged 45 years and over selected from five collaborating urban and regional Aboriginal Communities in NSW.

“Study aims
to identify both risk
factors and protective
factors for successful
ageing.”

Chief Investigators are:
Tony Broe, who is trained in geriatrics (ageing) and neurology (brain function) and works in Aboriginal health and ageing research;
Lisa Jackson Pulver, who is an Aboriginal woman, born and raised in Sydney in the Land of the Gadigal people, and is trained in public health and research;
Simon Chalkley, who is trained in diabetes research and geriatrics and works in the La Perouse Aboriginal Community Health Centre and at Prince Of Wales Hospital;
Dave Grayson, who is a statistician, and will manage our data base and ensure confidentiality of the data.

Other Investigators
Gail Daylight, an Aboriginal woman, who is Area Manager of Aboriginal Health in South East Sydney and Illawarra and works with the La Perouse Aboriginal community;
Vicki Wade, an Aboriginal woman, who is Area Manager of Aboriginal Health in Sydney South West and works with the Tharawal Aboriginal community in Campbelltown;
Tim Agius, an Aboriginal man, who is Director of Aboriginal Health for Sydney West and works with the Aboriginal Communities in Penrith and Blacktown;
Leon Flicker, who is Professor of Geriatrics at the University of Western Australia. He has managed to set up the Kimberley Indigenous Cognitive Assessment (KICA) Study;
Jeffrey Rowland, who trained in geriatrics with Tony and works at Prince Charles Hospital in Brisbane. He has developed an assessment tool called “RUDAS” which will be part of the study;
Martin Prince, who is Professor of Psychiatry in the UK. He is an expert on dementia assessment in non-Aboriginal indigenous communities. Martin worked with Tony on the Sydney Older Persons Study.

If you would like more information, would like to tell other people what you are doing, or would like to make comments, please contact

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Background to the Project

We know a substantial amount about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples’ health in general and also about early onset and high rates of chronic disease and resultant early mortality. Our information comes particularly from the more remote Aboriginal communities and from areas such as in WA; SA; NT, where Aboriginality is better identified. However, less is known about health and disease rates in urban and rural/urban Aboriginal people who make up a large majority of the total Aboriginal population. The situation in NSW in particular is less understood.

We also know that some good things are happening, particularly in the Northern Territory (Thomas 2006). This is part of a larger picture in which health and medical research has traditionally focused on rural and remote communities (Brough et al, 2003). Aboriginal populations are growing, the number of “older” Aboriginal people aged 45 to 64 years is now rising and fertility is falling, hopefully indicating an emerging transition to an older and healthier Aboriginal population (Wilson and Condon 2006). Dementia and cognitive decline are disorders 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.

Professor Leon Flicker and colleagues have conducted the KICA study (see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dementia News Dec. 2007), which indicated high rates of dementia prevalence in the Kimberley communities. The KICA study has raised the question of how common and important is dementia in the more numerous urban dwelling Aboriginal people.

Study Aims

The primary aim of the “Koori Growing Old Well Study” is to establish the prevalence or frequency of dementia in a sample of people from urban- dwelling Aboriginal communities in New South Wales. 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. The questions we hope to ask include: What does “growing old well” mean for urban Aboriginal people? How many people achieve this? What are the causes - across the life cycle - of physical illness including premature heart, lung and vascular diseases, high blood pressure and diabetes? How common are they? How common is dementia? What factors across the life cycle impair our brains?

We want to find the preventable things across the whole life cycle, including the development of brain function in young people, that affect physical health in mid-life and lead to dementia in later life. We will look for ways to build healthy brains, extend healthy old age and possibly prevent dementia. We will also look for ways to improve present provision of dementia services and plan for future services. Finally we will employ and develop skills in Aboriginal Researchers and build knowledge about dementia in the Aboriginal communities.

Over the past decade Tony Broe has worked with Gail Daylight and Simon Chalkley to develop health services for older Aboriginal people and those with chronic diseases in the local La Perouse Aboriginal Community and South East Sydney and Illawarra Area Health Service.

Tony, Gail and Lisa Jackson Pulver, with funding from the ARC/NHMRC Ageing Well Network and the University of NSW, have worked with other colleagues to study Aboriginal ageing and cognition, and to examine the cultural meaning of dementia for Aboriginal people. This work led to the successful application for NHMRC funding in 2008 with AHMRC Ethics approval.
Community Engagement and Study Development

We are working with a number of communities to identify the research sites in NSW for the Project; however we have been careful not to make promises to Aboriginal communities that we may be unable to keep, or to engage in detailed arrangements until we received full funding for the Study during 2008. We plan to spend the first year of the Project, in 2008, talking with and enrolling communities, further developing our study methods, instruments and data base and ensuring our study methods are culturally appropriate. After extensive discussion with participating communities prior to any data collection, we will start the field work and interviews with Aboriginal participants in early 2009.

References


If you’d like more information about the Koori Growing Old Well Study please contact: Sandra Forster tel (02) 9352 4259 or sandra.forster@sesiahs.health.nsw.gov.au or Hamish Robertson on mob 0425 237 942 or hamish.robertson@sesiahs.health.nsw.gov.au

Koori Growing Old Well Study
is located at Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute (POWMRI) in Sydney