

Breakthrough in predicting premature birth

June 23 2016, by Jess Reid



A blood test developed by a team of scientists, including researchers from The University of Western Australia, can identify women who are at risk of having a premature birth but are not displaying symptoms, as early as 18 weeks as into their pregnancy. The breakthrough builds on previous work by the researchers who developed a similar test for women who presented to hospital with early contractions.

The test is the most accurate one to date and provides the earliest detection of premature birth, with a 86 per cent accuracy in determining mothers at risk of early delivery.

The research, carried out by scientists from UWA, University of Toronto, University of Alberta and the University of Calgary (as part of the Preterm Birth and Healthy Outcomes Team (PreHOT)) was made

possible by a \$5 million Canadian (\$5.2 million Australian) grant from Alberta Innovates – Health Solutions.

Premature birth is the main cause of death and disability of babies globally and accounts for approximately eight per cent of births in Australia – that's 26,000 Australian babies born too soon each year.

Aside from infant death, premature birth can result in lifelong physical ailments from organs not developing properly in the womb.

UWA Associate Professor Craig Pennell from UWA's School of Women's and Infants' Health, a lead researcher in the study, said the test worked by identifying gene expression in a person's blood that could lead to a high probability of premature birth.

"One of the biggest problems with [premature birth](#) is that it is very hard to predict in the middle of pregnancy which deliveries will occur before 37 weeks gestation," Associate Professor Pennell said.

"Our new test will enable women at high risk early access to medical care which will reduce the rate of preterm birth.

"In particular, in remote areas, a simple blood [test](#) mid-pregnancy can guide which [women](#) can remain in their communities and which need to seek early specialist care."

Provided by University of Western Australia

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