

Preeclampsia: We can do more

11 October 2018, by Emma Sandham



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Each year, more than 10,000 pregnant women in Australia suffer from preeclampsia and 30,000 die from it on a global level. The condition, characterized by high blood pressure, can be fatal and have long-term health effects for both mothers and babies. It causes the death of 780 babies each day. These numbers, according to Dean and Foundation Chair of Medicine at Western Sydney University Professor Annemarie Hennessy, are unacceptable, and profoundly sad, when the condition can be prevented and patients better cared for with effective treatments and responsive systems of care.

With more than 20 years' experience in both preeclampsia research and clinical practice – as an obstetric and renal physician – Professor Hennessy says the key to better health outcomes for the condition is balancing rigorous, world-leading scientific research with thorough teamwork, and personalised delivery of care.

"Regardless of the effectiveness of various drugs and treatments, these interventions still need to be given to the right patient at the right time and in the right way. Once this is understood, it opens doors to better treatments and health outcomes," says

Professor Hennessy.

Leading the charge in achieving this balance, Professor Hennessy herself balances being a world-leading researcher with being a clinician passionate about delivering the best care for every patient. She is a leader of medical education who encourages future clinicians to 'deep dive' into research and to be better informed about the best possible care that can be provided.

As a researcher, Professor Hennessy heads up the Western Sydney University preeclampsia research team which, among other things, is continuing to investigate the links between [high blood pressure](#) and cardiovascular disease in women, especially around the time of [pregnancy](#). Using MRI technology this research has been able to identify connections between placenta and a mother's damaged blood vessels – potential markers for future blood pressure problems. In turn, this work could unlock the possibility of non-invasive methods for the early detection of preeclampsia.

Professor Hennessy is also head of the HRI vascular immunology research group based at the Heart Research Institute. At Western and the HRI, she supervises a number of Ph.D. students including Dr. Shikha Aggarwal who is investigating a potential new blood test for preeclampsia, Dr. Katrina Chau who is investigating new proteins in pregnancy, and Dr. Renuka Shanmugalingham who is investigating the toxic effect of poor blood supply on the placenta. These clinical scientists are not only making important new discoveries about women's health, but they have become champions in the region for better care of women across the board.

As a clinician, Professor Hennessy knows of the importance of partnerships in ensuring the best possible outcomes for her patients. Beyond her work as an active obstetric and renal physician based at the Campbelltown Hospital, where she has a close working relationship with researchers, nurses and obstetricians – she has also held

positions in hospital management, clinical service delivery planning and workforce and vocational training with the NSW Ministry of Health.

As a teacher of medical education since 1997, Professor Hennessy has also been a long-term advocate for quality postgraduate training and seen first-hand the power of incorporating research into clinical teaching.

"What lies at the heart of clinical training and at the heart of research is the same: questioning – a vital skill to teach our future clinicians," says Professor Hennessy.

While Professor Hennessy's research focus is preeclampsia, she says her approach to health – which encompasses world-leading scientific research, nurturing partnerships, personalised delivery of care and passionate delivery of clinical education that incorporates research – is one that could be applied to any disease and condition.

"To consider health in such a holistic way, forces us to also think of treatment and [health](#) delivery in a holistic way – to match robust science, with personalised and effective treatment delivery that responds to community needs. My hope is that this approach will not only have a major impact of the prevention and treatment of [preeclampsia](#), but on healthier individuals and communities more generally."

Provided by University of Western Sydney

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