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Media Statement

WORLD-FIRST TRIAL PROVES EXERCISE HELPS MEMORY

West Australian health experts are urging older people to get active after proving for the first time that just 20 minutes of activity each day can prevent memory deterioration.

In a world-first, a team from the WA Centre for Health and Ageing (WACHA) based at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) has shown that regular physical activity can lead to a lasting improvement in memory function.

The WA-based trial results will be published in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* today.

WACHA director Professor Leon Flicker said people over the age of 50 could pro-actively prevent memory deterioration by joining in simple and easy exercises each day.

“What our trial tells us is that older people who take up some form of aerobic exercise for as little as 20 minutes a day will be more likely to remember things like shopping lists, family birthdays and friend’s names,” he said.

“People don’t have to run a marathon to get the benefits – it’s as simple as doing some forms of simple activity like walking or dancing, every day for around 20 minutes.

“The results of this trial are very encouraging and a great step forward in helping older people improve their memory and potentially delay the progression of dementia which can eventually lead to Alzheimer’s disease.”

Today, almost 190,000 Australians live with dementia*, a number that is expected to increase with an ageing population, and one in four for people over the age of 85 have moderate to severe dementia.

“What’s interesting about this study is that physical activity doesn’t just have benefits for memory and preventing Alzheimer’s disease, it highlights the importance of exercise to boost overall wellbeing and mental health,” Professor Flicker said.

“We all know that exercise can help ward off physical conditions like heart disease and obesity and assist in overall wellbeing and fitness but this study adds another compelling reason to that list.”

During the trial, 170 volunteers aged 50 years and over were divided into two groups, a control and a group which undertook to achieve a 150 minutes of activity each week, ranging from walking, ballroom dancing to swimming, for a six month period.

Participant cognition was tested during intervals over an 18 month period – those who took part in physical activity continually out-scored the control group, which actually reported an overall decline in cognition.

WAIMR director Professor Peter Klinken praised Professor Flicker’s team and said the trial was a great example of how medical research could have a positive effect in the community.

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“This trial really shows us how medical research can offer benefits to the WA community right now as well as future generations, and I’d urge all older West Australians to take note of these important findings.” he said.

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*Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007:
<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/age/dandad/dandad.pdf>

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