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Media Statement

WA RESEARCH REVEALS ALARMING INDIGENOUS DEMENTIA RATES

New research has revealed dementia rates among Indigenous West Australians to be among the worst in the world and more than five times higher than non-Indigenous Australians.

The Western Australian Centre for Health and Ageing (WACHA), based at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR), has reported that 12.4 per cent of older Indigenous people living in WA's Kimberley have dementia.

The current rate of dementia Australia-wide for people over the age of 45 years is 2.4 per cent.

WACHA Director and University of Western Australia Professor Leon Flicker said the first-of-their-kind statistics, gathered using a new assessment tool, would provide a basis for further studies into appropriate services and care.

"Using a new culturally-appropriate test our team has developed, we've discovered the prevalence of dementia among Indigenous people aged over 45 living in the Kimberley is very high" he said.

"We believe the prevalence of dementia in the Kimberley indigenous population is one of the highest we've seen among all other studied populations throughout the world.

"With this understanding, we are now taking our work to the next level and looking into developing health services for people with dementia in remote Indigenous communities, and how best these services can be provided to improve the outlook for older Indigenous Australians."

The results will be published in the prestigious journal 'Neurology' on Tuesday November 4.

The study was undertaken as part of the National Health and Medical Research Council-funded Kimberley Indigenous Cognitive Assessment (KICA) investigations and involved 363 participants from five communities and one town in the region.

"The first phase of the KICA study in April 2003 saw us develop a culturally-appropriate tool to assess dementia, which meant we could test and document participant cognition levels more accurately than before," Professor Flicker said.

"Age is the major risk factor for dementia, but the overall health risks the Indigenous population faces may also be contributing, because the same risk factors for cardiovascular disease are linked to dementia."

The success of the study was made possible by collaboration with many organisations including Kimberley Aged Care Services, the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council and the National Ageing Research Institute.

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**MEDIA CONTACT: WAIMR media consultant, Sarah Hayward
m 0411 404 415, o (08) 9388 9280**