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Media Statement

WA RESEARCHERS FIND NEW GENETIC LINK FOR SCHIZOPHRENIA

Western Australian patients have helped local researchers discover a new genetic link for schizophrenia.

Research led by Professor Assen Jablensky, director of the Centre for Clinical Research in Neuropsychiatry at The University of Western Australia, and done in collaboration with Professor Luba Kalaydjieva, head of the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research's (WAIMR) Molecular Genetics Laboratory, has revealed the gene Neuregulin 3 (*NRG3*) is associated with a particular subtype of schizophrenia.

Professor Jablensky said while most people thought schizophrenia was one disease, it was actually a group of disorders.

"Our latest research finding, published in the international journal *Molecular Psychiatry*, has shown that variations in the Neuregulin 3 (*NRG3*) gene is associated with a subtype of schizophrenia in which patients suffer persistent psychotic symptoms but where their cognitive functioning – that is their ability to think, perceive, remember and reason – is relatively unaffected," he said.

Professor Kalaydjieva said understanding the genetic differences between subtypes of schizophrenia was crucial for being able to better treat those affected by this potentially-disabling illness.

"It will ultimately help in the development of new drugs targeting specific dysfunctions and lead to more personalised treatments which is good news for patients," she said.

The *NRG3* gene, which is located on human chromosome 10, has recently been identified as one of the several genes that differentiate the genome of modern humans from the genome of the Neanderthals, suggesting an evolutionary selection for enhanced cognition.

The research was conducted as part of The Western Australian Family Study of Schizophrenia (WAFSS), a WA Health Centre for Clinical Research in Neuropsychiatry project – and involved studying more than 400 people with schizophrenia and 223 people with no history of mental illness.

WAIMR director Professor Peter Klinken congratulated the Professors on their work.

"Schizophrenia affects about one per cent of the population or one in 100 people, so it is well designed research, such as this, that has the potential to make an enormous difference to the many families who are touched by it," he said.

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Media contact:

Sarah Hayward, sarah@capturemedia.com.au, 0401 141 483, (08) 9381 8237