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Media Statement

SCHOLARSHIP BOOSTS BID TO REDUCE DIABETIC RETINOPATHY BURDEN

Ahead of World Diabetes Day 2010 (November 14), Perth scientists have received a boost to their research into diabetic retinopathy – a condition that can lead to blindness in people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

The Diabetes Research Foundation of Western Australia has announced Lakshini Weerasekera, a PhD student at the Centre for Diabetes Research based at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research, is the recipient of its inaugural Alex Cohen Diabetes Scholarship.

The \$70,000 Scholarship will allow Ms Weerasekera to aid the diabetic retinopathy research being led by the Centre's Professor Grant Morahan and Dr Lois Balmer.

Professor Morahan said the goal of the project was to shed new light on how to better treat diabetic retinopathy by developing better ways of studying the disease.

"Diabetic retinopathy occurs when the tiny blood vessels inside the retina at the back of the eye are damaged as a result of higher blood glucose in people with diabetes. These changes can have a terrible effect on a person's vision and may even cause blindness," he said.

"The funding provided by this Scholarship will allow Lakshini to help develop the tools to enable us to identify the genes responsible for causing diabetic retinopathy.

"Once we've found these genes, we will work with colleagues at the Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. This collaboration will enable us to test if certain compounds used in traditional Chinese medicine can be used to successfully treat or even prevent diabetic retinopathy."

Diabetes Research Foundation of WA (DRFWA) executive director Sherl Westlund said she was thrilled the Foundation was able to help fund such vital research.

"The Alex Cohen Diabetes Scholarship, which will be presented at the DRFWA Research Symposium on November 12, has been made possible through a generous bequest and we are excited that in its first year will go towards helping uncover new treatments for diabetic retinopathy," she said.

"This research being undertaken by Grant Morahan and his team is very promising and adds to research we have already funded which sets out to determine the prevalence of diabetic retinopathy amongst children and adolescents with type 1 and 2 diabetes in rural Western Australia, something which has not been investigated previously."

The DRFWA, based at Royal Perth Hospital, is one of the State's longest running diabetes research funding groups, having been established in 1976 to stimulate research into diabetes in Western Australia, has now raised and distributed over \$4 million dollars for this work. The DRFWA continues to fund research into all aspects of diabetes including the many complications that can develop from diabetes and programs addressing the need to further understand the psychological impact of living with diabetes, particularly for children and adolescents. For information about DRFWA, please visit www.diabetesresearchfoundation.asn.au or call (08) 9224 1006.

Media Contact: Natalie Papadopoulos, natalie@capturemedia.com.au, 0407 984 435