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MEDIA STATEMENT

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KRISTEN NOWAK WINS YOUNG TALL POPPY OF THE YEAR

One of Western Australia's top young scientists who has been instrumental in leading research towards a cure for Floppy Baby Syndrome, a paralysing disorder that affects thousands of infants worldwide, has won the inaugural Western Australian Young Tall Poppy Science Award.

Dr Kristen Nowak, who works for the WA Institute for Medical Research, was last night presented with her \$5,000 award at a ceremony held at the University Club of WA.

The Young Tall Poppy Science Awards recognise the recipients' research achievements as well as their capacity and commitment to communicate science and its significance to the community.

WAIMR Acting Director, Professor Peter Leedman said, "This is a wonderful achievement and due recognition for Kristen's outstanding contributions to science generally, including her bench/translational outcomes and also her commitment to organisations such as the Australian Society for Medical Research where she has played a key role over many years. It is also a great reflection on her mentors."

Dr Nowak said, "I think these awards are a wonderful opportunity to highlight science to the whole community. Science underpins so much in our every day lives. It's especially exciting to share science with school students. We're born naturally inquisitive about science so it's great to nurture that interest."

Dr Nowak has taken part in more than 20 community talks for the general public – largely made up of primary and high school groups and career advice forums as well as those aimed at encouraging young women into the field of science.

She was one of four finalists, all from UWA, including Associate Professor Meri Tulic, from the School of Paediatrics and Child Health; Dr Marco Fiorentini, from the Centre for Exploration Targeting and Dr Swaminathan Iyer, ARC Australian Research Fellow and deputy director of the Centre for Strategic Nano-fabrication.

In 1999, Dr Nowak was the first to identify a group of devastating muscle conditions that cause Floppy Baby Syndrome is due to a defect in a gene known as ACTA1. Since then, she has worked towards finding a cure for Floppy Baby Syndrome and has developed a tool leading to the establishment of world-wide screening centres, including one based in Perth, to diagnose the condition.

For more information about UWA: www.uwa.edu.au

The screening allows scientists to diagnose and provide answers to families who had no knowledge of what was causing this terrible disease in their newborn child, which in most cases takes their lives before the age of one.

In 2009, Dr Nowak and her team at WAIMR revealed it had cured mice with the disease, allowing them to live to their second birthday, well beyond the previous nine-day prognosis.

She was named the 2000 West Australian Young Australian of the Year in Science & Technology, Western Australian Young Scientist of the Year in 2007 and inaugural recipient of the WAIMR Marshall Medal in 2008.

MEDIA CONTACT:

WAIMR Communications Manager: Carolyn Monaghan: 0448 021 932