



MEDIA RELEASE

Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute

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Early warning test for Parkinson's receives national recognition

The research of Dr Kay Double, an NHMRC Senior Research Fellow at the Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute, has received the nation's highest commendation through her inclusion in the NHMRC's 2006 "10 of the Best" booklet.

This national publication will be launched by The Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott at 10am, Friday 1 September in the Scientia Gallery, University of New South Wales.

Dr Double's research into Parkinson's disease looks at the function of neuromelanin, a pigment unique to human brains. In the brain cells of a person with Parkinson's disease, this pigment disappears.

Based on her findings, Dr Double and her team have developed a new blood test which will provide early detection for the loss of neuromelanin and this may predict the onset of Parkinson's.

Dr Double's work investigated the vulnerability of the pigment in a Parkinson's disease brain, how it occurs in a healthy brain, why these changes occurred and the consequences of changes for the survival of the brain cells.

"We found that the pigment in the healthy brain protects the cells from free radical-damaging molecules and other toxins," she said, "but in the Parkinson's diseased brain, the pigment is changed so that instead of protecting the cells, it becomes toxic itself.

"Our research indicates that increased amounts of iron bound to the pigment cause the cells to be damaged and die."

"This research is significant it has allowed us to design a new blood test for the onset of Parkinson's disease. It has also highlighted the potential to develop new treatments to slow down, or even stop altogether, brain cell death," concluded Dr Double.

The blood test, currently being commercialised, will not only provide early detection but also correct diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. At the moment, Parkinson's disease can be diagnosed only after signs such as slowness, stiffness and tremor appear.

The Institute's Executive Director, Prof Peter Schofield said, "Kay's outstanding research, conducted at the Institute over the past five years, validates our mission to conduct world-class medical research to cure human disease, improve quality of life, and thus create a legacy for the future. This recognition by the NHMRC is a direct reflection of her exceptional ability in the research arena."

Dr Double has been awarded a NHMRC Senior Research Fellowship to continue her research into the causes, diagnosis and treatments of Parkinson's disease.

Ends. 31.08.06

(Dr Double has been invited to present her findings at the European Federation of Neurologists in Glasgow next week and leaves Sydney at 2.00pm Saturday morning 2 September – any interviews will need to be prior to this.)

Media contact: Anne Graham: 0411 783 027; a.graham@unsw.edu.au.