



Media release

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World's largest respiratory health study launches next phase

The Tasmanian Longitudinal Health Study (TAHS), the world's largest and longest running respiratory health research study, is launching a new research phase focussing on the 21,000 brothers and sisters of the original sample.

The TAHS (formerly the Tasmanian Asthma Survey) is a collaboration between the Menzies Research Institute in Tasmania, University of Melbourne and Monash University.

Senior Member of the Respiratory Research Group at the Menzies Prof. Haydn Walters said the study, which originated in Tasmania, aims to provide a better understanding of the factors that affect the respiratory health of the community.

“The study is now the world's largest and longest running research study on respiratory health and one of the most significant community and family studies on respiratory diseases such as asthma,” Prof. Walters said.

“The TAHS started in 1968 by surveying all 8,500 children born in Tasmania in 1961 through schools across the State.

“In this next phase of the study we are hoping to contact all the brothers and sisters of those original 8,500 children which will allow us to study different children from the same family.

“Brothers and sisters share some of their genes but they also share their childhood environments.

“Studying siblings is a very important way to identify how diseases group within families. It also allows us to dissect out influences of both genes and the environment in the development of respiratory disease, and also in the maintenance of good lung function and health into middle age.

“Questionnaires will be sent later this month to all the brothers and sisters of the original TAHS participants. So if you have a brother or sister who was born in 1961 then keep your eye out for our questionnaire. We are hoping that everyone will get on board and support this important ground breaking research.

“We are asking everyone who receives a questionnaire to complete and return it. It's very important that as many people participate in this survey as possible, even if they don't have respiratory problems. Indeed, what keeps people well is just as important as what makes them sick!

“Results from the original and follow up surveys have contributed to a number of medical findings, including that one in ten people who were asthma-free as a child will develop asthma later on and that one quarter of children with asthma still have asthma at the age of 32. Another

important finding was that obese seven year old girls have three times the risk of developing new asthma as adults, as normal weight girls do. ”

The Asthma Foundation of Tasmania (AFT) CEO Cathy Beswick said the AFT was one of the sponsors of the original survey in 1968 and also recently provided the TAHS with \$50,000 of additional funds to continue the laboratory follow-up of the original participants. The follow-up sibling study is being funded by a \$852,563 grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

“The AFT views this study as a vital key in understanding asthma and other respiratory disorders and then what treatments are most appropriate,” Mrs Beswick said.

“The Asthma Foundation is honoured to have contributed to supporting such an important study that has been running for almost 40 years all the way back to 1968. We look forward to the outcomes of the follow-up studies including that of the siblings of those originally involved.

“We hope the ongoing TAHS will provide a detailed description of respiratory health and disease in the ageing Tasmanian population.”

TAHS Researcher and Senior Lecturer at the University of Melbourne Dr Shyamali Dharmage said that studying siblings provides a very powerful way to tease out whether it is our genes, or our environments which are the most important factors in developing diseases such as asthma.

“We can look at siblings who both had asthma as children but only one continues to have asthma as an adult. We can then determine what are the differences, during either childhood or adulthood that have contributed to this change in disease status,” Dr Dharmage said.

“The TAHS is unique internationally because it is the largest and longest running respiratory health study in the world. Additionally TAHS is the only study that was originally a family study with all the family members and the family environment being surveyed at baseline. The TAHS team is very excited about the possible contribution this study can make to the understanding of respiratory diseases internationally.

“This study will provide answers to what are the most important factors that contribute to changes in respiratory health from childhood to middle-age. It will enable us in the future to target intervention strategies and therapies more effectively with the ultimate goal of preventing some important respiratory diseases.”

Researchers conducting the current sibling follow-up of the TAHS are from the Menzies Research Institute of Tasmania, The University of Melbourne and Monash University.

The TAHS has been funded by the following granting bodies: National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia, Clifford Craig Foundation of Tasmania, the Asthma Foundation of Tasmania, Victorian Asthma Foundation, Asthma foundation of Queensland, the Royal Hobart Hospital Research foundation, University of Melbourne and University of Tasmania.

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