$12 million of innovative research to combat obesity

Exciting new research projects to better understand obesity and find ways to prevent and manage the condition have received a share of $12 million following the announcement of new National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grants today.

The 18 grants each take a unique approach to tackling obesity, from transforming ‘bad’ fat into ‘good’ fat associated with leanness and weight loss, to exploring the interaction between genetics, dietary habits and weight gain.

NHMRC CEO Professor Warwick Anderson commended the innovative research ideas, noting their importance given the growing prevalence of obesity in Australia.

“These projects are a testament to the talent and creativity of Australian researchers,” Professor Anderson said.

“Despite our growing pool of knowledge, obesity continues to rise in Australia, with up to three in five adults now overweight or obese. This is a real concern given the knowledge that being obese puts people at greater risk of many serious diseases,” he said.

“To turn this around we need to explore high-quality, innovative ideas with scientific rigour. I am confident these grants will lead us towards vast improvements in understanding, preventing and treating obesity.”

Obesity is one of the Australian Government’s nine National Health Priority Areas.

“The government’s NHPAs are also strongly supported research areas for NHMRC,” Professor Anderson affirmed. “In this current round of funding, around $308 million is going towards research focused on the NHPAs.”

The grants were part of a $539.8 million announcement made today by Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Minister for Health Peter Dutton, for 773 grants across a broad range of diseases and health conditions.

Research highlights

Dr Paul Lee, Garvan Institute of Medical Research, Project Grant ($379,633)
There are three kinds of fat in the body: white, brown and beige. While excess white fat results in obesity, brown fat is associated with leanness and lower blood glucose levels. Recent animal experiments show that under certain conditions, white fat can be turned into beige fat, leading to benefits such as weight loss. Dr Lee and his team will grow human fat cells in the laboratory and investigate the genetics of brown or beige fat.

Professor David James, University of Sydney, Project Grant ($1,598,568)

Understanding the impact of different diets on our bodies is crucial to human health. Excess calories lead to obesity, which is strongly linked to diseases including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, some forms of cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Professor James and his team will investigate whether there is one diet that optimises health for the majority of people, or whether differences in our genes and physiology means we can't take a 'one size fits all' approach to diet.

Dr Zane Andrews, Monash University, Career Development Fellowship ($455,452)

Dr Andrews will investigate how the brain controls calorie intake and calorie expenditure to find new ways to prevent obesity. In his fellowship, he will focus on specific sites containing two types of sensory neurons responsible for detecting changes in metabolism and controlling food intake, and examine their effects on eating behaviours and physiology.

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Further information

More information about the grants announced today can be found on the NHMRC website under Outcomes of funding rounds.