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Media Statement

HEALTH RISKS HIGH FOR MEN WITH HEMOCHROMATOSIS

A landmark Australian study is set to lead to all Caucasian Australian men being screened for the iron overload disorder hereditary hemochromatosis.

Hemochromatosis, the most common genetic disease among Anglo-Celtic Australians, triggers the body to absorb more iron than usual from food. One in every 200 Caucasians will have the two mutations of the HFE gene that causes hemochromatosis.

Research has shown men with the disease are 30 times more likely to develop complications than women – which can include arthritis, liver cancer and liver disease.

Now, a study of 32,000 people in Melbourne has revealed that 28 per cent of men with the mutations will actually develop health problems.

Co-author of the report, Western Australian Institute for Medical Research and University of Western Australia Professor John Olynyk, said the 12 year study demonstrated clearly that men with the genetic mutations were at a high risk of developing health issues.

“Researchers from WA, Vic and QLD collaborated with US analysts to solve the ‘big question’ – of those who have the mutations, how many will develop health problems?” Professor Olynyk said.

“The results were that a substantial proportion of males developed disease attributable to iron overload.”

Professor Olynyk said there was already a reliable test available to screen for hemochromatosis, but that it was currently only available by request.

“This study should provide enough momentum to ensure every Caucasian man in Australia will now be screened in adulthood,” he said.

“Given that it's one of the few diseases we have that we can actually pick up during a test and then treat to prevent serious illness, routine screening would be indispensable.”

“Not only that, but it's the only disease known to mankind where you can benefit the whole community and help to avoid health consequences by turning into a blood donor.”

Professor Olynyk said the research would now turn to exploring further indications that there is an increased risk of colorectal and breast cancer in people with two common mutations in the HFE gene.

The Melbourne Collaborative Cohort Study follows on from 1999 research conducted as part of WA's renowned Busselton Health Study.

The research paper by lead author Dr Katie Allen will be published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* this month.

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