

ROYAL
CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL



CENTRE FOR
Community
Child Health



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

MELBOURNE
BUSINESS
SCHOOL

MEDIA RELEASE

Issued: Thursday, 21 June 2007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Page 1 of 2

Calls for Australia to take kids more seriously

Child development is economic development, according to speakers at an early childhood seminar last night at Melbourne Business School, June 20, 2007, who also called on government and corporate Australia to take a more active interest and leadership role in nurturing children.

The Starting Early seminar was jointly organised by the Melbourne Business School and the Centre for Community Child Health, at The Royal Children's Hospital, and speakers included experts from early childhood, economics and criminology.

The seminar's audience heard that targeted early childhood intervention can pay for itself through increased tax revenues and decreased social, education and health costs.

"Research suggests strongly that Australia's future wealth, prosperity and social cohesiveness will be influenced significantly by the extent to which we invest early in the life course," explained Professor Ian Harper, Executive Director of the Centre for Business and Public Policy at the Melbourne Business School.

"Early childhood development is key to the creation and nurture of human capital and will influence a business' current and future customers, its employees and stakeholders. It will also either help, or hinder, the development of healthy workplaces resulting in increased productivity and a more attractive bottom line," Professor Harper added.

Speaking at the seminar, Professor Frank Oberklaid, Director of the Centre for Community Child Health, warned that there is evidence that many children are worse off now than they were a decade ago, despite Australia enjoying unprecedented economic prosperity.

"Many of the health and wellbeing problems we see in adults – obesity, heart disease, mental health problems, criminality, family violence, poor literacy, unemployment and welfare dependency – have their origins in pathways that begin much earlier in life," explained Professor Oberklaid, "Many of these conditions and common problems are preventable or can be improved if recognised and managed early."



MEDIA RELEASE

Issued: Thursday, 21 June 2007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Page 2 of 2

The USA is seen as the pioneer in evaluating the effectiveness of early intervention programmes. One landmark randomised control study, which tracked the children of pregnant mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds, found those who received intensive preschooling and home visits had better cognitive and non-cognitive scores as teenagers. As adults, they were more likely to have attended university, less likely to be unemployed,

and less likely to be in jail. The intervention cost about US\$15,000 a child but the benefits were estimated to be US\$105,000.

Economics fellow, Dr Andrew Leigh of the Australian National University called for increased funding for Australia to run its own randomised trials to test the effectiveness of early interventions in the Australian context.

“Early in the 20th century, Australia was regarded as the social laboratory of the world, boldly willing to experiment with new ideas,” said Dr Leigh, “But in the past decade we seem to have shed the mantle of policy innovator.”

“We should put promising social policies like early childhood intervention programs to the test. The results would reap valuable rewards for future generations.”

Ends

Further information

To arrange interviews with one of the speakers, please call:

- Rachel McConaghy, Centre for Community Child Health, Tel. 03 9345 4854, Mob. 0421 762 140
- Dr Andrew Leigh, Australian National University, Tel. 02 6125 1374. Mob. 0431 706 600.

To arrange an interview with Professor Ian Harper, please call:

- Anastasia Kailis, Melbourne Business School, Tel. 03 9349 8392, Mob. 0404 025 295