World-first trial holds new hope in tackling childhood obesity

With childhood obesity continuing to pose a serious public health challenge, a world-first trial conducted by Sydney Local Health District (SLHD) and Sydney University could hold the key to dramatically reducing the number of overweight and obese children.

The Healthy Beginnings trial recruited around 670 first-time mums and their babies to test the effectiveness of home-visits from community nurses to discuss healthier eating practices, being active and reducing the time spent in front of the television.

Eight home visits were performed by specially trained nurses for each mother, timed according to the development milestones during gestation and after birth of their child.

The nurses provided information on key health messages including:

- Breast is best
- No solid food until six months
- Eat a variety of fruit and vegetables every day
- Only water in my cup
- Be part of an active family

SLHD research and evaluation manager, Dr Li Ming Wen, said the babies in the interventional group had significantly lower body mass index and improved diets. The health of the mothers had also improved, he said.

“Mums who participated were significantly more likely to eat the recommended servings of vegetables and do more exercise than those who received the usual nursing support,” Dr Wen said.

Sydney University’s specialist in Paediatrics and Child Health Professor, Louise Baur, said the research findings were an important step in tackling the childhood obesity problem, especially in disadvantaged areas.

“The reduction in BMI achieved through this kind of intervention could translate into almost a 3 per cent reduction in the number of children who are overweight or obese, which has great public health significance,” Professor Baur said.

“Obesity continues to be a serious public health challenge with 1 in 5 Australian children aged 2-3 years of age either overweight or obese.

“The research shows the first few years of a child’s development are crucial in setting the foundations for lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes and targeted health promotion programs should be started as early as possible,” she said.
The two year study published in the latest edition of the British Medical Journal was funded by the NH&MRC and involved collaboration of researchers from Sydney University and Sydney Local Health District and South Western Sydney Local Health District (formerly Sydney South West Area Health Service).