



# Growth plan for Busselton study

**Mark Pownall**

MORE than four decades after it was started by general practitioner Kevin Cullen, the landmark Busselton population health study is the subject of growth plans that could substantially broaden the use of its valuable data.

The board of the Busselton Population Medical Research Foundation, which oversees the work and assets of the nine studies undertaken since 1966, is seeking a business development manager as the first phase of a major restructuring of its operations.

Foundation board member, Alan James, a clinical associate professor at University of Western Australia, said the role was the first of three permanent positions being considered to develop the studies' resources and make them more accessible.

Dr James said the business development manager would be seeking sponsorship from the community in order to fund a business strategy that included the addition of a scientific director and a data manager.

He said the plan was to put the project on a commercial footing.

Volunteers managed the studies until 1994, when state funding was secured, though much of the work remains unpaid. For

instance, valuable samples are stored in a local commercial cold storage facility at no cost.

"There is an enormous resource there but we really have to take advantage of it," Dr James said.

"How do we develop it to its full potential?"

The project would need about \$500,000 a year to fund this growth plan, which would also make the foundation a permanent sampling centre.

"If someone wants to answer a public health question they can come to Busselton and ask for a sample and run a survey," Dr James said.

Funding is also being sought to analyse existing data, which results from a host of tests and samples taken voluntarily and is widened over the years.

Busselton is considered unique because of the size and consistency of the data stretching back to the late 1960s, which includes physical samples from the area's population.

Professor Lyle Palmer, inaugural chair of epidemiology at UWA and head of the Laboratory of Genetic Epidemiology at the WA Institute for Medical Research, is one enthusiast for the Busselton studies.

Based on the success from Busselton, Professor Palmer, a *WA Business News* 40under40 1st

Amongst Equals winner in 2005, is leading a wider project starting at Joondalup, which is seeking to study 80,000 people at a cost of \$150 million.

He said the Joondalup study had already received \$25 million in in-kind support from several multinationals.

However, a 200-person trial of the Joondalup study has been delayed while several universities involved in the project establish how the intellectual property derived will be controlled.

Professor Palmer said studies like Busselton and the bigger proposed venture at Joondalup were very important resources for the scientific community.

He said Australia was rare in the community spirit of people who were generally willing to submit themselves for tests – the Joondalup study will involve a battery of hundreds of different measurements.

In comparison, the US was a difficult place to conduct such a study due to a lack of volunteers and onerous privacy regulations.

Apart from the scientific and, potentially, commercial benefits, such studies also provide important health data for the population being examined, which is useful for individual diagnosis and community health planning.



**COMMON GOAL:** Busselton Population Medical Research Foundation board members Alan James (left) and Lyle Palmer have a commercial aim for the iconic South West study. Photo: Jenma Howard