Under the Microscope

With Professor Assen Jablensky

Mental illness can be hereditary but a Royal Perth Hospital research project is showing the issue goes beyond genetics.

Prof Assen Jablensky, from the School of Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences at the University of WA, based in the RPH Medical Research Foundation building is assessing the impact of a mother's mental health on her children.

Ms Vera Morgan and Prof Jablensky are the chief investigators in this far-reaching project, which so far has received $749,125 from the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Prof Jablensky is looking at all new births in WA since 1980 - some 255,000 people – making it one of the biggest population samples of its kind in the world.

He is trying to discover whether having problems in pregnancy or delivery increases the risk of the child developing schizophrenia and other illnesses.

"We are using the linked medical research database of WA in order to find how many children born to mothers with severe mental disorders are at a higher risk of mental illness themselves as they grow up, compared to the children of mothers without a psychiatric illness," he said.

"By using the database we can do this without seeing the children and we can follow their mental and physical development from birth up to the age of 27.

"From this we are able to chart a developmental trajectory for each child to see if they develop psychiatric illnesses similarly or differently from their mother."

Prof Jablensky said the study had also revealed other birth complications for mothers with schizophrenia but some of these were due to lifestyle and life circumstances rather than mental illness.

"As a result we've started a pilot project to set up counselling for these mums where we can talk and try help them attend antenatal care, reduce or eliminate smoking, drinking alcohol or using street drugs," he said.

"We'd like to make it healthy and safe for them and to reduce the risks of their children developing schizophrenia."

The study will continue for another three years.

