

## **Under the Microscope** with Professor Osvaldo Almeida

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The Unit of Geriatric Psychiatry, is conducting a national study aimed at reducing depression and suicide among older Australians.

The National Health & Medical Research Council has granted \$800,000 over three years to assist Prof Professor Osvaldo Almeida with the study.

Prof Almeida said a total of 500 Australian general practitioners and 80,000 of their patients will enrol in the study.

He said depression affected 5 to 15% of people aged over 65, was a major cause of disability and was associated with increased morbidity and mortality.

The study involves the participation of General Practitioners (GPs) from across Australia, and investigates the effect of a simple GP-based intervention on the prevalence of depression and self-harm behaviour in the community.

Prof Almeida said that self-harm behaviour and depression were strongly associated with old age, with over 80% of people who attempted suicide being depressed, compared with 20% or less in the younger age groups.

“The focus of our current research is to clarify whether by educating GPs we can actually change hard core clinical outcomes of their patients,” he said.

Prof Almeida is also conducting a number of other NHMRC funded studies to determine the long-term consequences of smoking and physical activity on brain function and structure.

“Preliminary results indicate that certain areas of the brain associated with Alzheimer’s disease are affected in smokers, which may explain the greater risk of dementia observed in this group.

“We also have observational data showing that physical activity is associated with better mood and memory, and may improve the chances of good mental health (including memory) with increasing age.”