

University's Historic Clock Tower to be Lit up for Diabetes Day

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The University of Birmingham's historic clock tower (Old Joe) will be illuminated this Friday (14 November) as part of the worldwide commemoration of World Diabetes Day.

The 110 metre high clock tower will be one of a number of iconic buildings across the world illuminated in blue as part of the day's events. Built in 1900, the clock tower is one of the tallest buildings in Birmingham and nicknamed 'Old Joe' after Joseph Chamberlain, the University's first Chancellor.

The University is one of the UK's leading centres for diabetes research with groups working on everything from the basic science of the disease to clinical trials of novel therapies.

Diabetes is one of the major public health problems in UK with around 2.5 million people already living with the disease. Cases of Type 2 Diabetes, which is strongly linked to obesity and poor diet, are increasing rapidly. However, cases of Type 1 Diabetes, which is more common in children, are also rising.

Dr Parth Narendran who is a senior lecturer and consultant comments: "Diabetes is one of the most important public health problems facing the UK. To give people an idea of how big the problem is, over 14% of deaths in South Birmingham can be attributed to diabetes. This is one of the highest in the UK and reflects our high ethnic mix and social deprivation.

"There are also an estimated 3500 people who have undiagnosed disease and 20,000 with pre-diabetes. This is why it is so important that people understand the causes and symptoms of diabetes and if necessary seek advice and treatment. It is extremely worrying that there are so many people in the UK with diabetes who are not receiving treatment."

Dr Lucy Walker, a University Senior Research Fellow funded by the Medical Research Council, runs a research project looking at the role the body's immune system plays in Type 1 or juvenile diabetes. This form of diabetes is an auto-immune condition, where the immune system attacks the insulin producing cells in the pancreas.

Lucy explains: "In healthy individuals a population of cells (called Regulatory T Cells) stop the immune system attacking the body's own tissues. However, we have recently discovered that during the onset of diabetes, the cells responsible for damaging the pancreas produce a chemical (IL-21) that stops the regulatory T cells from working – so the mechanisms that should hold the immune system in check are disrupted.

We are now looking more closely at exactly how this chemical works and whether medicines that target it would help to treat diabetes."

Professor Tim Barrett an expert in childhood diabetes is leading work to develop new treatments to tackle childhood obesity. One current project at the Birmingham Children's Hospital aims to increase physical activity in obese children and adolescents using interactive media like Playstation dance mats.

Children recruited onto the current study are being offered a 12 week programme of exercise using dance mats at home. The researchers hope to see what effects this exercise has on the children's body composition and lifestyle as well as psychological outcomes, such as self-esteem.

Professor Barrett comments: "Childhood obesity cases have doubled in the UK since the start of the millennium and we already know that obese children are more likely to become obese adults.

This means we are already seeing increasing numbers of children with Type 2 diabetes caused by poor diet and obesity, something that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago.

Studies like ours are important because physical activity is crucial in preventing the development of type 2 diabetes, and getting young people who may already be overweight to participate in exercise can be very difficult.

However, there is a genuine concern that if action isn't taken our current generation of children will die from obesity related disease before their parents."

For further information contact Ben Hill, Press Officer, University of Birmingham, Tel 0121 4145134, mob 07789 921163, email: b.r.hill@bham.ac.uk

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Professional photography of the illuminated clock tower will be available after the event.

Note to Broadcasters – filming with diabetes patients can be arranged through the press office

NOTES TO EDITORS

World Diabetes Day

World Diabetes Day (WDD) is the primary global awareness campaign of the diabetes world. It was introduced in 1991 by the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in response to the alarming rise in diabetes around the world. In 2007, the United Nations marked the Day for the first time with the passage of the United Nations World Diabetes Day Resolution in December 2006, which made the existing World Diabetes Day an official United Nations World Health Day.

Last year, the global diabetes community rallied behind the call to light iconic landmarks and buildings in blue to mark World Diabetes Day. A total of 279 iconic monuments were lit in 2007 as beacons of hope for the millions of people worldwide living with diabetes. A full list can be found on the World Diabetes Day website. This year, with your help, we aim to illuminate more than 500 monuments. Visit www.worlddiabetesday.org for more information and support material to help you light a monument near you.

The University of Birmingham Clock Tower

Built in 1900, the clock tower is one of the tallest buildings in Birmingham and nicknamed 'Old Joe' after Joseph Chamberlain, the University's first Chancellor. The tower is 110 metres high – just higher than Big Ben in London – and is based on the Mangia Tower in Sienna, Italy. It is said that the tower was the inspiration for J R R Tolkien's 'all seeing eye' in the Lord of the Rings series. The largest bell weighs six tons.

