

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

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The 110 metre high clock tower will be one of a number of iconic buildings across the world turning 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 arguably the most important public health problem facing the region. At over 8%, the prevalence of diabetes is the highest in England, and locally in South Birmingham, over 14% of deaths can be attributed to diabetes. This reflects our high ethnic mix and social deprivation.'

'There are more than 14,000 registered diabetic patients in this area, an estimated 3500 who have undiagnosed disease, and more than 20,000 have pre-diabetes. It is extremely worrying that there are so many people in Birmingham with diabetes who don't even know that they have it. This is why it is very important that people are aware of this condition and if necessary seek advice and testing for it.'

Dr Lucy Walker, an MRC Senior Research Fellow, runs a research group looking at the role the body's immune system plays in Type 1 or juvenile diabetes. Type 1 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) stops the immune system attacking the body's own tissues. However, it has been hard to decipher how these cells actually work. We have recently discovered that expression of a particular protein, called CTLA-4, is essential for Regulatory T cells to inhibit diabetes. We are now looking more closely at exactly what CTLA-4 does and whether we can use this knowledge to design better treatments for Type 1 Diabetes.'

Dr Jeremy Tomlinson is working on the link between obesity and Type 2 diabetes, which is a major research theme at the University of Birmingham. Understanding precisely how obesity increases diabetes risk is an essential step to trying to combat this process.

Professor Tim Barrett, a leading expert in childhood diabetes, is pioneering new approaches to tackle childhood obesity. 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. In some Birmingham districts up to 50% of 11 year olds are overweight or obese. This means we are now seeing increasing numbers of children with Type 2 diabetes caused by poor diet and obesity, something that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. There is a genuine concern that our current generation of children will die from obesity related disease before their parents.'

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For further information

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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, World Diabetes Day became an official United Nations Day as a result of UN Resolution 61/225.

Diabetes is a leading global cause of blindness, kidney failure, heart attack, stroke and amputation. The number of people living with diabetes has increased considerably over the past 30 years. In 1985, an estimated 30 million people worldwide had diabetes. A little over a decade later, the figure had risen to over 150 million. Today, according to the International Diabetes Federation and World Health Organization, the figure exceeds 300 million. Unless action is taken to implement effective prevention and control programmes, it is predicted that the total number of people with diabetes will reach 440 million by 2030.

Last year, the global diabetes community rallied behind the call to light iconic landmarks and buildings in blue to mark World Diabetes Day. Over 900 buildings in 84 countries were lit in 2010 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.

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 and it is rumoured that if you walk under the tower when the clock chimes, you will fail your degree.

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