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Health

Researchers hope to break down barriers to healthy eating

By Rachel Clark
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Members of the Global Centre for Preventative health (GLOBE) and Nutrition Researchers and community stakeholders from Deakin University's Institute for Health Transformation (IHT), UON Department of Rural Health, Tamworth Regional Council, and Hunter New England and Central Coast Primary Health Network meet to begin two-year research project. Picture by Gareth Gardner

A two-year research project will focus on the eating habits of residents in Manilla and Barraba.

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regional communities purchase and eat food and what factors influence their diets.

Barraba and Manilla will be the focal points of the project in the Tamworth Local Government Area (LGA).

All the key researchers and Tamworth representatives met this week at the University of Newcastle Rural Health campus to discuss ideas and the project's design.

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Lead researcher Dr Cindy Needham said they want to understand the lived experiences of the people in these communities.

"We want to understand how they are accessing healthy food, what the barriers are, and designing ideas or initiatives that we can implement in the future," she said.

"From there, we will co-design a digital tool that will help us engage with regional and rural communities to design healthier food

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The project will be completed in collaboration between Deakin University, the Primary Healthcare Network, the University of Newcastle (UON), and Tamworth Regional Council (TRC).

The $757,310.20 project has been funded as part of a $9.6 million Medical Research Future Fund.

UON nutrition researcher Dr Tracy Schumacher said they can't wait to get started.

"We have long been waiting for an opportunity like the one offered by Dr Needham. It would have taken us many years to get to the same point on our own," she said.

"Our dedicated local working group has been developing a number of projects over the years to help improve health outcomes for our district."

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Dr Needham said.

"We know access to healthy food retail drives diet and many people in these communities do not have a lot of access to healthy food," she said.

Lead researcher Dr Cindy Needham is keen to understand the barriers faced by regional and rural communities when it comes to fresh, healthy eating. Picture by Gareth Gardner

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When it comes to our smaller communities, Dr Needham has learned transport is a huge barrier to healthy eating.

"A lot of communities have to travel long distances to access fresh and healthy food," she said.

"There is not much public transport and if they don't have access to a car, they are quite limited in their options."

She said working with local stakeholders and researchers is essential for the study to be fruitful.

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"We know we can't just drop into a community; we need to link with the partners to develop those connections with the community."

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