Picture: Sandra Pegg

Breakthrough in halting early bubs

EXCLUSIVE
ANGELA POWNALL

A discovery made by Perth researchers could cut premature births by up to 40 per cent — and very early births before 34 weeks by up to 80 per cent — in a world-changing breakthrough in pregnancy care.

Research at the Women and Infants Research Foundation has identified a specific bacterial combination in a pregnant woman's vagina that strongly predicts premature birth. They hope the bacterial imbalance can be treated during pregnancy with a course of antibiotics and probiotics, preventing the baby being born early.

More than 6000 women at King Edward Memorial and St John of God Subiaco hospitals are involved in a trial to test the treatment on those who test positive for the bacterial combination.

Lead investigator Matt Payne said the discovery would hopefully lead to worldwide use of the test to diagnose women at high risk of premature birth and the ability to treat the problem mid-pregnancy.

"This new vaginal bacterial DNA test really could be a game changer in obstetrics if the treatment regimen we are currently trialling is shown to work," he said.

Dr Payne and his team developed an algorithm to identify the problematic bacterial combination and a vaginal swab test to detect it.

A trial involving 1000 pregnant women at KEMH showed the test predicted 38 per cent and 44 per cent of women who had their baby at less than 37 and less than 34 weeks gestation, respectively.

Hunter Chetwynd was born at 29 weeks.

More than 26,000 babies are born prematurely in Australia every year.

Sandra Pegg and Kris Chetwynd took their son Hunter home to Baldivis two weeks ago after 89 days in KEMH.

Hunter was born by emergency caesarean at 29 weeks after Ms Pegg's placenta stopped working.

Hunter was given just a 50 per cent chance of survival.

"He had multiple organ failure," Ms Pegg said. "The machines were at the capacity of what they could do for him."

Ms Pegg, left, said more research and more pregnancy monitoring was needed to prevent premature births.

"If it wasn't for the whole team at King Edward's, Hunter wouldn't be here today. We can't thank them enough," she said.