



Study: Professor Barry Marshall

Bacteria exposure helps cut MS risk

■ Cathy O'Leary

The theory that exposure to bacteria early in life boosts the immune system has been backed by WA research linking a stomach ulcer bug to a lower risk of multiple sclerosis.

Scientists say the finding that the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* seems to protect against MS bolsters the case for the so-called "hygiene hypothesis" playing a role in autoimmune disorders.

Experts believe that exposure to infections in childhood primes the immune system and stops allergic and autoimmune conditions developing later in life.

They argue the use of antibacterial products could be causing growing rates of allergies and autoimmune conditions in Western nations.

H. pylori is known to infect about half the world's population and in most people causes no symptoms.

The Perth study was carried out by the WA Neuroscience Research Institute and Professor Barry Marshall, who won the Nobel Prize for helping discover the bacterium was a cause of stomach ulcers.

Using blood samples, they checked whether 550 people with MS had previously been infected with *H. pylori*, finding it was less common in them compared with other people. Those without MS were found to have a higher rate of past infection.

The researchers said the link could pave the way for designing drugs to treat or prevent MS and other autoimmune diseases.

MS Society of WA chief executive Marcus Stafford said it could fast-track progress on new treat-