



Okinawans hold secret to long life

BRISBANE

Eating a third fewer calories, keeping fit and remaining social are the keys to a long and healthy life, researchers on ageing have found.

Brothers Craig and Bradley Wilcox, principal investigators of the Okinawa Study, said a combination of these factors had created ideal conditions for a cluster of centenarians in the 1.3 million-strong Japanese community.

Craig Wilcox said 47 of every 100,000 people in Okinawa lived to 100 or more. "This is opposed to a country like Australia, where maybe 10 or 15 out of 100,000 people (live to more than a 100)," he said.

Bradley Wilcox said the Okinawa community had by far the highest reliably documented concentration of centenarians in the world.

Although genetics had been found to play a part in this longevity cluster, it was only a small factor in the overall equation.

Craig Wilcox said that, contrary to the rest of Japan, where rice was the dietary staple, the people of Okinawa ate a huge variety of green leafy vegetables, water-based soups and high quantities of sweet potatoes.

"The sweet potato was the staple of the diet and the sweet potato is very low in calories," he said.

"It's got a healthy version of carbohydrates with a low glycaemic index."

The brothers, who will present their findings at the second international conference on healthy ageing and longevity in Brisbane this week, said the older generations of Okinawans did not own cars and kept up strong relationships with friends and family.

But Craig Wilcox said all of these factors had come into play only in recent decades, with the introduction of good health care stopping the spread of contagious diseases such as

tuberculosis.

He said not only did the Okinawans enjoy long lives, but they were also active and productive up until their 90s.

"What we found . . . was that over 80 per cent of the centenarian population were functionally independent, with an average age of 92," he said.

He said that unfortunately the people of Okinawa might not hold their longevity record for too much longer.

"Now in Okinawa there are more hamburger joints per capita than any other part of Japan, due to the large (US) military presence in Okinawa," he said.

"What we're seeing is the leanest people in Japan turning into the heaviest, within two generations."

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATED PRESS