Clinical research critical

“Clinical research holds the key to medical progress, and is set to expand in the Illawarra.”

Professor Wilf Yeo

The Illawarra will soon be in a stronger position to make important medical progress, to the benefit of all who live in the region.

Scientists at the University of Wollongong have already made good progress in understanding some of the mechanisms underlying clinical conditions, the effects of certain medications or foods on metabolism, and the value of various dietary and lifestyle interventions.

The recently formed Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI) – a joint initiative of the University and the Area Health Service – has further developed health and medical research in the region.

Through its newly launched Research Network, IHMRI is bringing academics, clinicians and other health professionals together in new and fruitful collaborations that will reap benefits for the local community and beyond.

Critical to medical progress is clinical research. This is research done in humans to improve knowledge about a health related issue. The cornerstone of clinical research is clinical trials, such as those carried out to test a new treatment in patients with a particular disease or disorder.

It is important for practising doctors to do this clinical testing. Modern medical practice is based on the scientific evidence that a treatment has the right balance between effectiveness and safety. While new treatments are extensively tested in laboratories, these tests can only predict how the treatments will act. To thoroughly understand how a new treatment actually works in humans, it needs to be tested on people affected by the disease.

Some doctors in the Illawarra currently conduct clinical studies as part of local or international research to test treatments or other health interventions in the final stages of their development. For example, in the fields of cancer, diabetes, cardiology, kidney diseases and arthritis.

The opening of IHMRI’s new Clinical Research and Trials Unit (CRTU) in mid-2010 will see clinical research significantly expand in the Illawarra. The CRTU will operate from a dedicated, purpose-built facility within the new IHMRI building, and will involve doctors, nurses, scientists and allied health professionals all working together to combine their skills.

While many clinical studies on complex health problems will continue to be carried out in the region’s local hospitals, the CRTU will provide an important resource for many other trials that don’t require an inpatient setting. At the same time as supporting clinicians who are already doing research to expand their activities, the Unit will offer the opportunity for others to be involved in clinical research for the first time.

And importantly for the economy, the CRTU stands to attract new business to the Illawarra by providing a unique, regional ‘one-stop shop’ for organisations looking to run clinical trials.

As residents of the Illawarra, we will have the opportunity to make our own contribution to medical progress by taking part in a locally-run clinical trial. Once the CRTU is up and running, recruitment will get underway for volunteers to take part in studies such as those testing the effect of different nutrition or exercise interventions on health.

Volunteering for clinical research has many benefits. It can help people who are suffering from chronic or life-threatening illnesses, contribute to the advancement of medicine, provide researchers with important scientific information in a safe and confidential environment, and provide data needed by authorities to assess whether new medicines or treatments are safe and effective for use in the community. Without
Clinical research, medicines could not be approved for prescribing by doctors or made available for sale at pharmacies.

Clinical research holds the key to medical progress, and the Illawarra will be making a growing contribution in the coming years.

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