UOW proves inspired choice

Australia! Sharks, kangaroos, Crocodile Dundee, Flying Doctors, Hugh Jackman. These are some of the first things that come to the mind of a European when thinking of this ‘exotic’ country. Who would think of world-class health research?

I started my studies at the University of Munich. Established for over 500 years, it is among the oldest research facilities in the world. This has its clear advantages; decades-long established structures, facilities, research and teaching. Many things in Munich and Europe have strong tradition, including how to brew beer.

So why would I come to Wollongong? Because to me, it is an even better place to live and work. The University of Wollongong is young, inspiring and supportive, and it is a great pleasure to be part of the exponential rise of health research in the Illawarra that started with the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences and is now complemented by the Graduate School of Medicine and Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI).

Still, I have discovered many differences in life and work between Munich and Wollongong since moving to Australia, far beyond snow at Christmas versus scorching heat at the beach.

In Germany’s favour, funding makes a difference. Although increasing, numbers say that Australia spent about 20 per cent less money on medical research than Germany has in the past years.

Ease of travel makes a difference. In Europe, to find required research facilities, you jump on a train and go to the next major city, with cities fairly equally distributed in every direction. In Australia, facilities might not be found on the whole continent.

What makes up for these differences are the great people and the positive work atmosphere here. Colleagues and students in Wollongong are extremely friendly and creative. The University of Wollongong campus has a very collegiate atmosphere, which reflects the dynamic research community in Australia.

Despite the differences, there is good similarity between Germany and Australia in the high quality of health and medical research. Although Europe and the US may have larger resources and longer traditions to draw upon, Australia continues to build its capacity to produce great research.

For example, in the Center for Translational Neuroscience at UOW and in cooperation with the Schizophrenia Research Institute, we have established fundamental research on the devastating brain disease schizophrenia. We have started research in the new field of schizophrenia neuroimmunology, and it was pleasing to see at the latest European Conference that our research tracks well with the standard of the rest of the world.

With the opening of the new world-class IHMRI laboratory facilities, we will be able to further drive this research forward; the envisaged health precinct will allow us to open a new chapter in health delivery in the Illawarra.
Health and medical research is a creative process and can make a difference in the lives of many. In Wollongong, I have found the potential to make this difference not only through research but also by linking with the community. Indeed, I have had the delightful experience of meeting the community members genuinely interested in our work in a number of ways, including at our recent Mental Health Awareness Expo and by hosting a campus tour at IHMRI.

I hope for the future that we can maintain the high standard of our work, enlarge our mark on the world map of health research and, most importantly, make a difference for the Illawarra community.

Dr Elisabeth Frank is Schizophrenia Research Institute Fellow in the Center for Translational Neuroscience, based at the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute at the University of Wollongong. Her research focuses on studying neurotransmission and neuroimmunology in schizophrenia.