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**Research opportunity knocks**

There is a lot of reform happening in NSW Health at the moment and therefore in the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health Network.

With these changes happening, we are going to need to play to our strengths. I think those strengths are obvious, and as it happens, they’ve become very timely. We can’t take anything for granted and need to look at where the opportunities are and maximise them.

One of these areas of opportunity is establishing a broad academic culture in the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District. It is probably fair to say that academic activity in this area perhaps does not match that of more metropolitan areas, but there are plenty of strengths we can draw on to change this.

One of the strengths we have is that the Illawarra is an ideal health services research environment, with a population of approximately 350,000 that is relatively stable, that broadly represents the national population, and where around 88 per cent of the health care residents receive is provided in the region.

We also have the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute, the Australian Health Services Research Institute, and the Graduate School of Medicine - a major focus of which is community health - which are of huge benefit to the local health system. The relationship between these University centres, and the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, is going to be critical in terms of establishing a broader academic culture throughout the entire system, with all the benefits that brings.

Related to this is a number of very high quality fundamental research departments at the University of Wollongong. One can neither undervalue, nor even anticipate, the contribution of fundamental science research to our understanding of health and outcomes for treatments over the long-term.

However, while we should never underestimate the potential impact of fundamental science and we should always support such research, in today’s health environment we also need to find more immediate benefit from research collaborations.

For this reason, a major collaborative project – the Illawarra Population Health Information Platform - has been proposed to create a research information partnership between the local health district, IHMRI and the health centres at the University of Wollongong mentioned above.
The aim is to properly assess new health initiatives and use the linked data to undertake research into perhaps the causes of disease, but certainly the relationship between the health status and healthcare utilisation and predictors of health outcomes.

It will give clinicians and researchers in the Illawarra region the strategic advantage of getting international competitive research funding, because of their access to a unique dataset that the project will hold.

While the project is likely to give us information about health services, it will be a resource for those clinicians who have questions they wish to have answered about the effect of various medical interventions, and I believe it could be a way of generating an academic culture throughout the entire health service.

We have significant challenges, but in many ways the Illawarra is an ideal base for this project - there’s a confluence of talent, imperatives, and what may be for NSW a unique academic and health environment.

We should pursue this enterprise for our mutual benefit and, in the first instance, for the benefit of the people of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven and in due course, the wider Australian community. This project has the capacity to actually change the way we do business towards academic activity across the entire health services of the area and to contribute to improved healthcare for our local community.

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