Illawarra’s health stars align

By Professor Don Iverson, Executive Director, Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute

We have all heard about the negative impacts of recent job losses in the manufacturing sector and the urgent need for government and business to take action on creating jobs for the future.

Creating and sustaining new jobs is certainly challenging, but the picture may not be as dire as it first appears. In fact, a quiet revolution is occurring in the Illawarra and it is happening in the health care and social assistance sector.

According to national labour market information, health care and social assistance is already the largest employer in the region, employing over 24,500 people, or 12.7 per cent of the Illawarra workforce compared to 11.5 per cent for the state average. On this solid foundation, we can build and develop a vibrant, health-based economy that will create more jobs and attract new capital.

Recent changes to the local health landscape, and at the University of Wollongong (UOW), are likely to accelerate this growth and create new opportunities for the existing pool of highly qualified and talented people to collaborate on health initiatives that will not only provide direct health benefits to local residents, but lead to the creation of new health-related businesses and services.

One of the key changes is the creation of the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District (ISLHD), which replaced the South Eastern Sydney and Illawarra Area Health Service just over a year ago. And, on 1 January this year, Illawarra Shoalhaven Medicare Local (operating as Grand Pacific Health) replaced the Illawarra and Shoalhaven Divisions of General Practice.

The ISLHD and Grand Pacific Health now have responsibility for guiding the development and coordination of health and hospital services for residents of the Illawarra and Shoalhaven. Local control over planning decisions is important because it means decisions can be considered and made within the context of the total local environment. Also, because the geographic boundaries of these organisations are the same, there is a real opportunity for improved planning, coordination and implementation of health and hospital services.

Add to the above the continued development of the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI), the proposed development of the UOW’s iAccelerator and Health Precinct and the creation of the Illawarra Stakeholder Taskforce and you have a potent mix.

IHMRI, a joint venture between the ISLHD and UOW, is already paying dividends, with the scope of its research activities expanding significantly over the past 18 months, with several activities having the potential to stimulate local economic growth through the development of ‘spin-off’ companies.

IHMRI’s Clinical Trials Research Unit expects a two-to-three-fold increase in the number of clinical trials running in 2012, creating opportunities for local residents to access new treatment options as well as bringing new money into the region.
iAccelerator, meanwhile, provides an environment for the ideas and discoveries of UOW students and faculty staff to evolve into products and services that spur the creation of new companies. Many of these products and services will be health-related.

It is expected that the proposed Health Precinct will create over 1,000 new health and medical jobs and develop the sector as a whole. It will also facilitate the development of health and medical-related research companies as the sector matures.

For these opportunities to be fully realised, however, it is essential that our leaders work together in a cooperative manner – which is why the creation of the Illawarra Stakeholder Taskforce is so important. The taskforce includes leaders from business and industry, local and state government, the education sector, health sector and union movement.

All the health ‘stars’ are now aligned, and we have a real opportunity to develop a new and expanded health-based economy.

A health-based economy can be a primary driver of the region’s evolutionary growth. Apart from improving the scope and quality of health and medical services that residents can access, a health-based economy will create a range of new companies and jobs.

The Illawarra has never been in better health.