The scientists who work for us

By Professor Andrew Bonney*

Mention the words “health research” and most people immediately imagine men and women in white lab coats concentrating on the contents of test tubes and perhaps even working with rabbits or mice.

The general idea seems to be that these mysterious men and women come up with new treatments that are then tested by mysterious companies before eventually making it to your local GP – and then you.

What many people do not realise is that a lot of health and medical research is being done right here in the Illawarra on issues common to Illawarra residents. And it is done by local academics and clinicians with a passion for improving the health and wellbeing of people in their local community.

In fact, a lot of work has gone into developing a research model that brings academics and clinicians from all parts of the health sector together to ensure that research findings can make it ‘from the bench to the bedside’ as quickly as possible.

The Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI), established in 2008 as a joint initiative of the University of Wollongong (UOW) and Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, provides a focal point for this activity. It has a network of over 500 members with expertise in virtually every area of health, from nutrition to cancer, psychology to physiotherapy, aged care to infectious diseases.

IHMRI also gives GPs connected to the UOW’s Graduate School of Medicine (GSM), Medicare Local, Illawarra and Southern Practice Research Network (ISPRN) and other groups an opportunity to become ‘research active’.

My own experience as a GP made me curious about ways to improve the interpersonal aspects of patient care. I was also interested in developing a better model of chronic disease management. As the Roberta Williams Chair of General Practice at the GSM, I am now in a position to pursue other research interests, including the use of the National Broadband Network in patient care. By following my research interests I feel that I am not only improving my own knowledge but making a contribution to the community as a whole.
Given that GPs are in the business of preventing and treating disease, it is important that they enrich their knowledge and remain connected to a network of peers whose knowledge they can draw upon, when needed.

While there are indeed scientists in lab coats working at IHMRI to understand the causes of diseases such as Alzheimer’s and Motor Neurone Disease, there many clinical studies underway that will directly benefit the local community.

For example, through ISPRN, we have five projects underway looking at everything from how to improve nutrition screening for the elderly to sleeping tablet use to improving health literacy so that people can take more control of their medications.

There are dozens more research projects underway through IHMRI looking at childhood obesity, schizophrenia, transplant rejection and the best way for us to lose weight – and keep it off – through a longitudinal cohort study.

The point is that, far from being ‘faceless’ scientists, health and medical researchers are just as likely to be your neighbours or people you bump into at the supermarket.

The fact that the Illawarra has one of the most powerful and connected health and medical research networks in Australia should be a source of local pride. And local residents should feel confident that researchers have their best interests at heart.

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