Clinical trial focus

The era of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) started shortly after the end of World War II, and by the end of the 20th century they were considered the ‘gold standard’ for clinical research. Few people question the impact that RCTs have had on the practice of clinical medicine; in fact some commentators have attributed advances identified through RCTs as contributing to almost half the increase in overall life expectancy that was experienced in the last half century (J Clin Epid Metabol 2001;87:1929).

The US National Cancer Institute classifies RCTs on the basis of their focus and includes prevention, screening, diagnostic, treatment and quality of life trials. Clinical trials that focus on treatment are further categorised into phases, ranging from Phase 0 (to gather very preliminary information about a chemical or biologic agent with a very small number of people) to Phase 4 (to evaluate the long term effectiveness of a drug for years following its introduction into the market). The conduct of clinical trial research is important to Australia for a range of reasons. From a financial perspective, for example, the George Institute has estimated that over the last decade it received more than $300 million into its clinical trials research program.

A survey conducted by the NSW Clinical Trials Business Development Centre found that in 2008-09, 2680 clinical trials were registered in Australia. Research Australia has estimated that almost 20,000 volunteer Australian patients participate annually in clinical trials.

Through these trials patients were afforded the opportunity to access the most cutting-edge treatment regimens in the clinical area under study. It is worth noting that there is evidence that patients participating in clinical trials have better outcomes than those receiving usual care – thus whether clinical trials participants receive the new treatment option or the comparison/standard treatment option continues on page 5.
News

Driving donation

A generous contribution by a successful Illawarra businessman of almost $17,000 has led to IHMRI purchasing a Nanodrop Spectrophotometer.

Michael Corban, Dealer Principal of Corban Automotive Group (pictured), made the donation for IHMRI to the University in late 2009.

The Nanodrop measures DNA concentrations in tiny amounts for analysis. This piece of equipment is extremely valuable across a number of medical research areas.

"Thanks to Michael’s very generous gift, staff and students alike will be able to more effectively undertake their studies of human health and medicine,” IHMRI Executive Director Don Iverson said.

A plaque marking Mr Corban’s contribution has been placed on the Nanodrop.

Healthy eating for ageing grant

Jan Potter and colleagues at IHMRI and SESIAHS have received a grant of over $100,000 from the Department of Veterans Affairs to lead the project Coordinating access to food & nutrition services to assist older Australians post hospital discharge. The grant is part of the DVA’s 2009/10 Innovative Funding round and was awarded in August. The project will be administered at SESIAHS.

Near miss grants

The University also recently announced recipients of its near miss grants with two IHMRI associated groups successful for a total of $30,000. IHMRI researchers were also involved in a third successful grant. The NHMRC applications that received near miss funding from the University were:

- Mark Wilson, Marie Ranson and Michael Kelso: A new strategy for improved treatment of chemo-resistant tumours ($15,000).
- Andrew Aquilina: Understanding the structural basis for the conversion of chaperone proteins into agents of disease ($15,000).
- Sandra Jones, Don Iverson, Peter Caputi, Judy Mullan, Andrew Dailey, Lyn Phillipson: Closing the gap between drinking guidelines and older people’s alcohol knowledge, attitudes and behaviours ($15,000).

The Near Miss Grants scheme is for applications that are ranked close to the funded cut off by external funding agencies (for example the ARC & NHMRC).

Healthy eating clinical trial

People of the Illawarra carrying extra body weight are needed for the first volunteer trial that will wholly take place at the IHMRI Clinical Research Trials Unit.

The Healthy Eating And Lifestyle Study (HEaL), led by Linda Tapsell, will examine the success and benefits of different dietary approaches in weight management. In the year-long study, participants will receive dietary advice, regular health assessments, counselling sessions and a dietary plan.

By volunteering their time to participate in clinical trials, Illawarra residents will be a big part of the success of the CRTU’s role in translating research findings into better treatments and health outcomes for the local population.

Volunteers must fit the following criteria:
- aged between 18 and 65 years;
- overweight – Body Mass Index between 25 and 35 kg/m2;
- no diabetes, thyroid abnormalities or major illnesses; not pregnant or breastfeeding; generally well; and no food allergies.

Potential volunteers can contact 02 4221 4600 to register interest.

Congratulations

Guest editor

Jiezhong Chen has been invited to be guest editor of a ‘Cancer and Obesity’ special issue of Frontiers in Bioscience, slated for publication on 15 November. Dr Chen has invited international experts to contribute to the edition by preparing review articles, and through its publication is hoping to build the profile of this growing research field.

Frontiers in Bioscience is a peer reviewed biology and medical journal and virtual library and has an impact factor of 3.7.

Grants received

RIBG success

IHMRI research teams were successful in three of eight Research Infrastructure Block Grants in the latest round of NHMRC funding. New equipment totalling over $200,000 will be added to the resources available at IHMRI. The successful lead applicants and equipment are:

- Ulrich-Alex Bommer received $70,000 for a real-time cellular analysis system, xCELLigence.
- Xu-Feng Huang received $70,000 for a RT-PCR system and film processor.
- Andrew Aquilina received $63,000 for an ImagePrep system for mass spectrometry imaging sample preparation.

IHMRI Executive Director Don Iverson said: “This is a great outcome - three important pieces of equipment added to IHMRI that all researchers can access”.

If you have a success to share, email ihmri-admin@uow.edu.au
An opening for the future

With the glass windows and steel facade gleaming in the afternoon sun, over 200 guests were welcomed to the official opening of the new IHMRI building by University of Wollongong Vice Chancellor Professor Gerard Sutton on Tuesday 20 July.

The new building includes laboratories, research offices, a lecture theatre and an entire floor dedicated to clinical research trials. It is built to the latest standards and technology, housing some of the most sensitive equipment for medical research in the country.

One of the building’s most compelling aspects is the way its architecture supports IHMRI’s vision of collaboration: linking academic, clinical and public health researchers for improved clinical practice and health service delivery outcomes.

Official guests at the opening included NSW Deputy Premier and Health Minister Carmel Tebbutt, South Eastern Sydney Illawarra Area Health Service Chief Executive Terry Clout, National Health and Medical Research Council CEO Professor Warwick Anderson, Member for Keira, David Campbell, and Chancellor of the University of Wollongong, Jillian Broadbent AO.

The NSW Government generously contributed $15 million to the construction of the building. IHMRI is a partnership between UOW and the South Eastern Sydney and Illawarra Area Health Service. Ms Tebbutt said although the ultimate goal of IHMRI is to improve the health of residents of the Illawarra, ideas that start here “will benefit patients on the other side of the state, on the other side of the country and beyond”.

“This will attract researchers and clinicians to this part of the world. It’s a place where cutting edge research can take place and make a real difference to patient outcomes,” Ms Tebbutt said.

Events & Visits

Smart art

An important aspect of making the IHMRI work environment more stimulating are the artworks made available from the University’s collection. Three prominent pieces were brought to life in August when the artist, Diana Wood Conroy, professor of visual arts in the Faculty of Arts, visited IHMRI to see her artworks hanging. Wood Conroy’s ‘Naming: Lake Mungo’, ‘Alexandria’ and ‘All the days of my life’ reflect her creative focus of bringing together contemporary approaches to landscape and subjectivity with images from Mediterranean antiquity in woven tapestry and painting.

Professor Wood Conroy said of her visit: “I am delighted to see my works so elegantly hung in IHMRI. Because I’m an asthmatic, since early childhood I have had a great preoccupation with getting enough breath. Issues of time, heartbeat and rhythm are there in my work. A research institute of medicine is very appropriate: I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for asthma drugs!”

Eminent visit

Professor Christopher M. Dobson of Cambridge University was hosted by Centre for Medical Bioscience and IHMRI in early September. Professor Dobson attracted a standing room only crowd for his seminar Life on the Edge: The Generic Nature of Protein Misfolding Disorders. He also toured the new IHMRI building and facilities, met with research teams at the University, and toured the local region.

Grain of insight

Six representatives of the NSW Government’s Industry and Investment Branch were hosted by Linda Tapsell on 25 August. The group included the Director of Productivity and Food Security Research, the Director of the Wagga Wagga Agricultural Institute, and cereal chemists with interest in grains and pulses. Discussions were held on the collaborative research undertaken by these researchers including new developments for nutritional qualities and sustainability of different and new grains for primary producers. The group viewed the Clinical Research and Trials Unit and discussed opportunities for further collaborative research in food and health.

Mind, body, shape

Xu-Feng Huang presented a lecture for the Research and Innovation Division’s Research Showcase Series titled Brain to the Mind and Shape: Schizophrenia and Obesity on Wednesday 8 September. Over 60 people from the University and general public attended the lecture which also received local media coverage. His presentation is available to download and listen to at www.uow.edu.au/research/news/showcase.
Introducing…

Dr Andrew Jenner

IHMRI welcomes Dr Andrew Jenner, who has joined us from the National University of Singapore. Dr Jenner obtained his PhD in Biochemical Toxicology from the School of Pharmacy, London in 1992. After gaining a European Science Foundation Research Fellowship to study free radical formation using EPR at Vrije University, Amsterdam he then joined the laboratory of Professor Barry Halliwell at Kings College London. Here he developed methods to quantify biomarkers of oxidative damage to examine mechanisms of free radical attack to lipid, DNA and protein and study their role in degenerative disease. He joined the National University of Singapore in 2002 as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Biochemistry and part of the Neurobiology and Ageing research program. Dr Jenner’s specific research themes are:

- Lipidomics – Cholesterol metabolism and lipid oxidation in disease (particularly neurodegeneration)
- Diet dependent mechanisms of colon damage and protection.
- Influence of dietary phenolic metabolism in promoting health.
- Development of reliable analytical techniques for measuring damage biomarkers and antioxidants in biological samples.

He can be contacted on ajenner@uow.edu.au.

Clare Atkinson, Technical Officer

Clare joined IHMRI in early August as the final member of the Technical Support Team. Her role is to facilitate the smooth operation of the Level 2 and Level 3 laboratories. This includes activities such as maintaining instrumentation; performing equipment inductions; managing common laboratory spaces; and implementing key OH&S practices and principles. She is based in the Technical Officer room (32.323) and can be reached on clareatk@uow.edu.au.

Amanda Morgan, Communications’ Coordinator

Amanda joined IHMRI in late July. She can assist with any information regarding editorial media, promotional flyers, website information, images and video, the IHMRI newsletter and blogs for events, seminars, research findings or grants and recruitment of trial participants. Amanda should also advise on all uses of the IHMRI logo and templates. She is based on Level 2 in the Operations Office: amorgan@uow.edu.au.

Spotlight on Research

Personality Disorders project

When patients arrive at emergency departments, doctors’ surgeries or health clinics, the recognition and identification of underlying mental health conditions is critical to providing the most appropriate treatment and care.

The gaps that mental health and drug and alcohol clinicians may have in their knowledge, skills and resources to address the treatment of personality disorders in patients has seen IHMRI researchers win a three-year, $2.5 million competitive tender to align services for the NSW Department of Health.

Between two and five percent of Australians will suffer from Borderline Personality Disorder at some time in their life. Thousands of people present for treatment of personality disorders across the country every year.

The major objective of the project is to develop new integrative and collaborative evidence-based treatments to ensure the best outcomes for patients, according to Project Leader Professor Brin Grenyer.

“Our success with this tender validates the importance of implementing evidence-based, effective treatment guidelines and practices for a group in the community that have often been overlooked or misunderstood,” Professor Grenyer said.

An enduring legacy of the Personality Disorders Project will be a website of resources and training materials for use throughout health services in NSW ensuring ongoing access to guidelines and the latest information.

Project summary:

- $2.5 million over three years to enhance treatment options for people with a personality disorder.
- A collaboration with Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute, South Eastern Sydney Illawarra Area Health Service, and the University of Sydney ensuring ongoing access to guidelines and the latest information.

Project deliverables:

- Expand specialist treatment options, including improved referral pathways
- Deliver well constructed and supported education and supervision programs
- Provision of expert interventions
- Evaluate specialist intervention models to provide guidance for future service development in NSW.
Grants available

Small grants, big start

Applications are now open for the inaugural IHMRI Small Grants Program. Grants of up to $5,000 are available to support small projects or preliminary studies that collect data to be used to support a competitive research application in areas aligned with IHMRI’s strategic goals, objectives and priorities. The grant program is open to IHMRI research network members who are active in one or more research themes and who are working together with at least 3 other network members on the proposed research. The IHMRI Small Grants application is available at IHMRI Central, the Research Network website (the link to this site can be accessed from www.ihmri.uow.edu.au). Applications close on Friday 15 October.

Research Network

Networking events

Over 80 guests attended the Spring Networking Evening on a warm afternoon on Wednesday 1 September. The event attracted an even balance of clinicians and academic researchers, who heard the University of Wollongong Vice Chancellor, Professor Gerard Sutton speak about his ongoing vision for IHMRI and watched the premiere of the IHMRI Video Tour.

For the diary

Our final networking evening for the year will be held on the first day of Summer, Wednesday 1 December 2010.

Network Update

As at August 31, there were 467 members of the IHMRI Research Network. If you haven’t done so, join now at www.ihmri.uow.edu.au/researchnetwork

IHMRI website

www.ihmri.uow.edu.au

The IHMRI website has undergone a makeover and will be moved into a new-look template soon (pictured below). The navigation of the website, although developed from the same foundation as the former website, has been tweaked and made more logical for the different audiences that visit the site to quickly find the information they need. Over coming weeks more information will be added to build the resources available on the site.

If you have any suggestions – particularly regarding specific needs for you or people you refer to the website – contact amorgan@uow.edu.au.

Clinical trial focus

continued from page 1

they are likely to benefit from their participation.

While some of the trials conducted in Australia may have involved only Australian researchers, most tend to be conducted by researchers located in multiple countries. Thus it is commonplace today for clinical trials researchers to affiliate with regional, national and international research networks for the conduct of clinical trials.

These networks allow the required number of patients to be recruited into studies in a shorter period of time thereby ensuring the study is completed quickly. Another benefit is that the results can be generalised more widely given the diversity of the trials’ participants.

Research Australia has estimated that almost 10,000 professionals and organisations are involved in the conduct of clinical trials in Australia. While these professionals represent the current clinical trials workforce they also contribute to the training of the next generation of clinical trials researchers and support professionals.

IHMRI is committed to participating in the conduct of clinical trials designed to test the efficacy or effectiveness of new drug and lifestyle treatments. While we expect most of the trials we participate in will reflect the health problems experienced by many Illawarra residents (hypertension, type 2 diabetes, smoking cessation among others), in some instances we will participate in trials that are of national or international importance, even though the condition may effect only a small percent of Illawarra residents.

We believe it is important for health and medical research institutes such as IHMRI to contribute to the advancement of medical science at all levels, from the discovery of mechanisms underlying health problems to the development of treatment options to the testing of newly developed treatment options through RCTs.

Towards that end, IHMRI will soon be launching an initiative that will allow Illawarra residents to register online as a possible clinical trials participant, and to be notified when trials are being offered at IHMRI that match their stated interests.

Professor Don Iverson
don_iverson@uow.edu.au

Clinicians and health professionals who may know of upcoming trials which could be undertaken at IHMRI, or who are interested in conducting clinical trials at the Clinical Research Trials Unit, can contact Chief Operating Officer Sue Baker Finch: sue_baker-finch@uow.edu.au.
Royal visit

Her Royal Highness Princess Soamsawali, Princess of Thailand, toured IHMRI during a visit to the University on 30 September.

Her Royal Highness, who has a special interest in nutrition, heard from Linda Tapsell about research and clinical trials being undertaken at IHMRI by the Smart Food Centre.

Her Royal Highness also met with Tony Okely from the Faculty of Education and watched children participating in a physical activity study in the Clinical Research and Trials Unit.

After a half-hour tour of the facilities, the Princess met with Thai students, which was followed by a Royal Luncheon.

Meet a Network Member

Jessica O’Garr

Where are you working at the moment?
Mission Australia Employment Solutions

Describe your role
I assist job-seekers to overcome their barriers to obtaining employment by providing them with short-term counselling and vocational assessments using psychometric tests as part of our Positive Pathways to Employment (PPTe) program. I also assist with planning, implementing and managing the PPTe program across 10 other Mission Australia sites throughout NSW. Another part of my role involves working with Centrelink clients as a Job Capacity Assessor to evaluate client’s capacity and suitability for employment and make referrals recommendations to other services.

What are the elements that you enjoy about your work?
I enjoy the challenge of doing Cognitive Behavioural Therapy with clients that present with difficult diagnoses and working to develop effective liaison networks to locate services to help my clients.

What’s your primary interest in health / healthcare?
Since working with the Borderline Personality Disorder program at Royal Perth Hospital Department of Psychiatry I have developed a broad interest in clinical psychology. I enjoyed the program development work I did at RPH and with Mission Australia and would like to do some more research in personality disorders or help seeking behaviour.

What's the most recent event you've been to or information you've read about your area of work that's interested you (ie what might inform other people in the network)?
The Networking Meeting in September was fantastic as it provided an informal setting to mingle with other health professionals and gave me the opportunity to meet new people and learn of some great services that are offered in the local area.

Why did you join the IHMRI Network?
To increase my professional liaison network and gain a working knowledge of the types of services and facilities that are available in the area to assist my clients.

If you have colleagues who may be interested, please pass on this newsletter and invite them to join the IHMRI Research Network:

ihmri.uow.edu.au/network