asmr Australian Society for Medical Research newsletter

Public, Political, Scientific Advocacy

JULY 2019

President's report

The 2019 Federal Election has been run and won, and the ASMR congratulates all the incumbents, newly elected MPs, and senators. Over the coming months, the ASMR will seek out meetings with all sides of government to highlight the immediate issues facing the health and medical research sector, and advocate for new investment to support a sector under ever increasing pressure.

In the lead up to the Federal Election, the ASMR released its position document, outlining four priority areas that are critical to ensuring the future security of Australia's health and medical research sector. First and foremost amongst these is the need for greater investment. Whilst nobody denies that the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) has been a welcome addition to the funding landscape, it has been designed to support a very specific part of the research pipeline, focussed on the translation and commercialisation of research. In the initial hype and excitement surrounding the MRFF, the NHMRC has been devalued. Indeed, during the last five years, when advocating to politicians for increased funding for the NHMRC, the consistent and repetitive response has been "well, once the MRFF reaches full capitalisation, then the sector will be fine, because the funding will have effectively doubled". We know this is not the case.

I have lost count of the number of conversations I have had with 'on the ground' researchers, from around the entire country, who have expressed their concerns to me about the focus on the MRFF at the expense of the NHMRC. Health and medical research is not a linear continuum. Whilst the 'pipeline' and 'valley of death' analogies have been used by researchers for many years, they do not truly reflect the *reciprocus* nature of health and medical research. The critical, fundamental science and translational research supported by statutory bodies like the NHMRC and ARC are essential to drive transformative health discoveries and commercial activity.

Whilst the MRFF does represent exciting opportunities to help facilitate research translation, several researchers from around Australia have continued to express their concerns about the overall transparency of the MRFF. ASMR first raised these concerns immediately after the MRFF was announced; however, five years later, and the answers are still less than satisfactory. Despite several disbursements now

Dr Roger Yazbek

announced and targeted towards strategic areas, there is little to no information available as to how these decisions were reached. And whilst the MRFF was first announced in 2014, we have yet to see a dedicated website for the MRFF with comprehensive information on funding announcements and metrics on the number of applications, who has been successful, gender balance of disbursements etc. Nor have we seen any sort of comprehensive

In this issue:

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EMPOWERING RESEARCH FOR A HEALTHY & EQUITABLE AUSTRALIA

2019 Federal Election: ASMR Position

INVEST 3% OF TOTAL HEALTH EXPENDITURE

Australia's current investment into health and medical research through the NHMRC and MRFF equates to 0.53% of total health expenditure.

ASMR's recommendation is to lift this investment to 3% of total health expenditure.

FULL CAPITALISATION OF THE MRFF

The ASMR seeks commitment to full capitalisation of the MRFF to support research translation and implementation as an integral part of the research pipeline

PROTECT INTEGRITY OF PEER REVIEW FOR RESEARCH FUNDING

All decisions to award public funds to research should only be made following a rigorous and transparent process of independent expert review of applications, free from any political interference on the awarding of research funds.

SUPPORT THE OFFICE OF THE NHMRC

To maintain the rigorous grant assessment processes for which the NHMRC is renowned, the budget of the office of the NHMRC should be increased and adequate resourcing provided as needed.

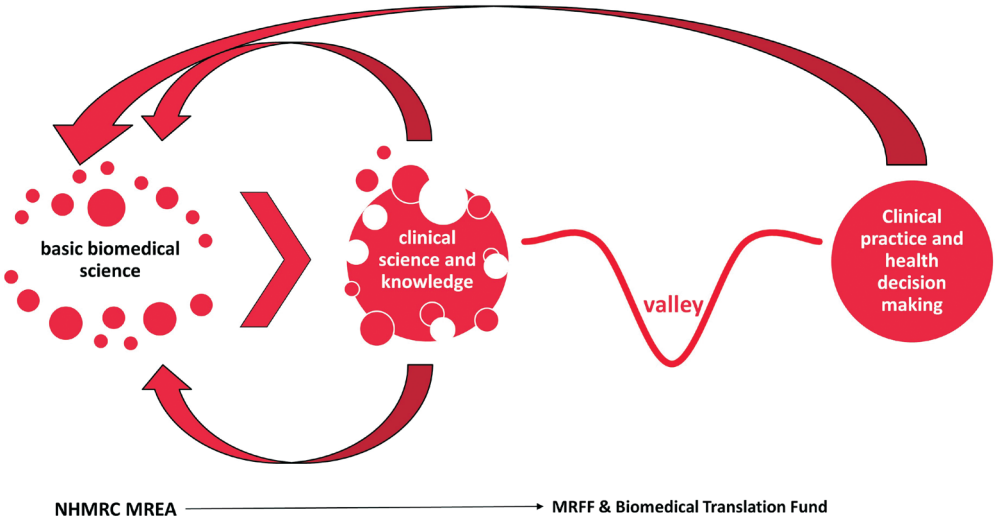
THE AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH
WWW.ASMR.ORG.AU

reporting on the funds that have been so far allocated. The one spreadsheet that does exist and broadly summarises MRFF grants awarded since 2016–17 raises significantly more questions than answers.

The problems facing health and medical research, and the science sector more broadly are not necessarily to unique to Australia, and contributions to the ASMR July newsletter provide an international perspective on research funding and policy. The evidence is abundant that government investment in science, health and education drives national prosperity. Australia's leaders must come together to develop a holistic plan that places science, health and education at the center of Australian Government policy. ASMR will continue to deliver this message to Government as part of its mission to empower research for a healthy and equitable Australia.

The first week of June saw me travelling around country with the ASMR Medallist, Dr Elizabeth Finkel. Beginning in Hobart and traversing the country, one capital city at a time, it was an incredible experience to travel with someone so passionate about communicating science. I must say that one of the particular highlights of the week was hearing the research snapshots presented by EMCRs at the gala dinners around the country. I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to all members of the State committees and ASMR Directors for their hard work in making these events happen, in particular our ASMR MRW® convenor, Dr Laura Masters. I also want to thank Cath West and Priscilla Diment, who go above and beyond in the ASMR executive office in the lead up to, and following, ASMR MRW®.

The 58th ASMR National Scientific meeting will be held in Fremantle from November 20–21. The theme *'Ebbs & Flows: From Discovery to Practice'*, seeks to explore the reciprocal nature of health and medical research, from basic discovery to translation and implementation and flowing back to basic science in a model of continuous improvement and innovation. Program highlights include the introduction of the Synapse award, the Peter Doherty Leading Light Award, Inside the Scientists Studio and several opportunities for free abstract presentations. I really look forward to welcoming you all to what will be an exciting and innovative meeting.



ASMR Research Awards

The awards support a postgraduate student member of the ASMR nearing completion of their studies, or a recently graduated (three years maximum) postdoctoral member to undertake a short period of research in a laboratory outside of Australia ($5,000) or in a distal laboratory ($2,000) within Australia. Applicants for these awards must have maintained ASMR membership for more than 12 months prior to applying.

For more information, see: *https://asmr.org.au/research-awards/*

A perspective on the potential impact of Brexit on research in the UK and wider Europe

By Ben Luisi

Imagine human activity from an extra-terrestrial perspective. The world economy might appear as a striking outcome of social organisation, with an astonishing complexity that can exert a powerful force for changing the planet, for better or worse. Economy might appear as a process that provides activity to keep humans occupied, and to some extent provide some type of financial security. It might also seem surprising how the system can enter into states of high chaos and near catastrophe due to risky behaviour. The extra-terrestrials might perceive this as a curious behaviour in which earthlings enjoying the thrill of taking extreme risks and gambling on outcomes, even without being able to assess the likely impact. They might also note how scientific activity evolves. They would observe that science is another complex social activity with world stretch and international character. It can be seen to be driven by mobility of ideas and is dependent on motivated people who provide the next generation of ideas and activity. The same is true for innovation in all aspects of high-tech industry and computer innovation. These activities are driven by the activities of motivated people, and that mobility of these individuals sustains the process.

From the limited perspective of an alien from another country, I have had opportunity to witness economic development and evolution of scientific prowess of the UK over the course of nearly four decades. The economic change has been striking and seems to have been mostly beneficial. In the sciences, the UK has been extremely strong and performs exceptionally well and above its population size. Like the UK, Australia benefits from English being a dominant scientific language internationally, and this also attracts personnel for training and experience. Although not proven robustly, intuitively the UK appears to have benefited tremendously from the mobility of researchers. The enormous success of Diamond Light source, the innovation to bring in centralised cryoEM facilities and for sequencing the genome are examples of the innovative spirit that attracts talent from all over the world. The UK has benefited from this in so many tangible and indirect ways. Visiting many labs in the country, one can see readily that they are international in composition and highly cosmopolitan. My own lab is international with wonderful colleagues from the UK, Poland, USA, Canada, Bangladesh, France, India.

One growing concern is whether the messy exit of the UK from the European union will impact on the attraction of the UK as a home for mobile scientists. From a personal perspective, the potential restriction and movement away from accommodating foreigners may make the UK seem riskier as a career move. The impact is likely to be slow to develop but would likely see some losses in the dynamics and innovative spirit that has characterised many of the UK institutions. In conversation with several colleagues at different UK institutions, it is clear that non-UK

Ben Luisi

scientists are looking for alternative institutions outside the UK, even if this involves giving up tenured posts. Several of my colleagues have already moved back to mainland Europe. Students are unclear if they can apply for internship programs to bring them to the UK. The impact of this will be slow to develop and will be not immediately apparent.

The UK is still an attractive destination for many scientists, and it is hoped that the momentum of this attraction will carry on and that mobile researchers will continue to see the UK as a destination for career development and as a place to settle and to contribute to the strong body of highly trained and innovatively minded expertise. I cannot objectively comment on what motivated the drive for the exit decision in the UK. Like an extra-terrestrial, I am clearly living in some kind of a bubble with no real concept of the perspective of those living outside. But from the local alien perspective, the outcome is highly risky and unlikely to be beneficial for the scientific expertise base that drives so much scientific and technological innovation here.

Mentoring Program

Looking for a career boost?

Between 5-12 years post-PhD?

ASMRs online mentoring program has 29 of Australia's leading researchers ready to help you with one-to-one professional help and advice.

Take advantage of this free program now!
http://www.asmrfiles.org.au/mentorprogram/

Canada's Fresh Investment under Justin Trudeau's Administration

By Ravi S.N. Munuganti, The Vancouver Prostate Centre

In 2018, the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's administration made a historic investment in science and research and scientists couldn't be happier. The budget included almost Can$4 billion (US$3.1 billion) in new funding for science over the next five years (1.7% of GDP), a significant portion of which will go to the country's tri-council agencies:

1. Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR)
2. Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and
3. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

It also proposed stable funding for the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and expressed support for early-career researchers. Majority of budget modifications were direct responses to Canada's *Fundamental Science Review* in 2017, recommendations made by a panel of experts (see Naylor report) on how to better support science across Canada. Importantly, the review recommended boosting spending on basic research from Can$3.5 billion per year to Can$4.8 billion.

According to the budget, NSERC and CIHR each received Can$354.7 million, while SSHRC allotted with Can$215.5 million. Moreover, there is a big boost in funding for the CFI of $763 million over the next five years and $462 million per year starting in 2023-24. This investment provides the CFI with long-term, stable funding, one of the key recommendations from the *Fundamental Science Review*. This investment will allow the CFI to continue to support researchers by investing in state-of-the-art labs and research equipment in Canadian universities, colleges and research hospitals. Investing in research infrastructure creates the spaces to train the new generation of researchers and bring together researchers and entrepreneurs who can jumpstart innovation.

As the Government of Canada's health research investment agency, CIHR supports over 13,000 world-class researchers across all four pillars of health research (biomedical, clinical, health systems services and population health) from all regions of Canada. During fall-2018 research competitions alone, CIHR approved 371 grants (with a total of Can$275M) with a success rate of 15%. Majority of those successful applications (65%) are focused on biomedical research followed by clinical applications (18%). It is interesting to observe that early career researchers have decent success rate (22%) whereas mid-career and senior investigators have a success rate of approximately 40%.

Recent Canadian budget not only increased funding but also focused on developing skills and training for Canadian research trainees in graduate programs, such as master's and doctoral students, and postdoctoral fellows. The new budget proposes to provide $114 million over five years, starting in 2019–20 to the federal granting councils mentioned above, to create 500 more master's level scholarship awards annually and 167 more three-year doctoral scholarship awards annually through the Canada Graduate Scholarship program. Apart from training aspects, the budget also focused on expanded paid parental leave to provide students and postdoctoral fellows who receive granting council funding more flexibility to integrate training with family responsibilities.

Ravi S.N. Munuganti

PETER DOHERTY leading light award

2019 PETER DOHERTY LEADING LIGHT AWARD.

Recognising outstanding research in Australia over the past 5 years.

Named in recognition of Nobel Laureate, Professor Peter Doherty, whose scientific achievements and commitment to science advocacy continues to inspire the research community, this award celebrates the achievements of mid-career researchers (5-12 years post-doctoral).

The award will be presented at the ASMR National Scientific Conference, Ebbs & Flows: from discovery to practice, 20-21 November 2019.

For judging criteria and submission details please go to www.asmr.org.au/research-awards

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Victorian Premier's Awards for Health and Medical Research

The Premier's Awards for Health and Medical research is a joint initiative of the Victorian Government and ASMR, recognising the exceptional contributions and leadership capabilities made by early career health and medical researchers who are currently in, or have recently completed their PhD studies.

This year's awards include categories in the fields of Clinical Science, Public Health, Basic Science, Health Services and a category recognising Aboriginal researchers in any field of health and medical research.

Category award recipients will each receive $5000, and the Premier's Awards for Health and Medical Research Excellence award recipient will receive an additional $15,000 as the overall winner.

Important dates

Applications open
1st August 2019
Applications close
30th September 2019
Presentation of awards:
23rd March 2020

To find out more about last year's winners and further information on how to apply, visit *https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/clinical-trials-and-research/premiers-award*

Health and medical research funding in Australia

By Dr Daniel Johnstone

Scope

This overview seeks to outline the main sources of investment into Australian health and medical research (HMR). There is a wide variety of different sources of funding for Australian HMR, including state governments, philanthropic organisations and the private sector. However, the scope of this overview will be restricted to funding available through programs supported by the Federal Government.

NHMRC

The primary body providing funding for Australian HMR is the **National Health and Medical Research Council** (NHMRC), an independent statutory agency of the Federal Government. The NHMRC has a long history in this domain, having allocated its first grants over 80 years ago, in 1937. It funds research across four broad research areas (basic science, clinical medicine and science, health services research, public health) through a range of different schemes that support individuals, teams, ideas or priorities.

Research funding from the NHMRC comes from the Medical Research Endowment Account (MREA), which relies on annual appropriations from the Federal Budget. Appropriations for the 2019-20 financial year are $843 million. Budget allocations to the MREA have been increasing at the rate of inflation for the around a decade, and the forward estimates indicate that this trend will continue over the next four years. Unfortunately, this level of indexation does not appear to be keeping pace with the increasing cost of conducting research (estimated at 5% per annum). For example, when comparing the years 2014 and 2016, despite similar expenditure there were >16% fewer grants supported in 2016 than 2014.[1]

In 2016 the NHMRC embarked on a structural review of its grant program, and 2019 marks the first year of the implementation of the restructured program, in which Project Grants, Program Grants and Fellowships will make way for Investigator, Synergy and Ideas Grants. The guiding principles underlying the restructure (reducing burden, encouraging innovation, providing opportunities at all career stages) were well received by the HMR sector, but as this change becomes the new reality and gives rise to various uncertainties, it will be no surprise if the sector feels a collective sense of trepidation. It is challenging to predict behavioural change in the face of new opportunities and challenges – certainly the higher number of applications for Investigator Grants relative to Fellowships (38% increase) suggests the research support packages associated with these grants have been enticing. However, whatever anxieties permeate the sector this year, it is important to note that the first 1 to 2 years cannot be used as a reliable indicator of how the new NHMRC grant program will function over the longer term. It will be important to look at the number of awarded grants, rather than success rates, and consider how the capping arrangements will influence application numbers into the future. In the end, the same total amount of money will be invested in HMR as in previous years, just in a different format.

Dr Daniel Johnstone

MRFF

Alongside the NHMRC is the new kid on the block, the **Medical Research Future Fund** (MRFF). When announced in the 2014 Federal Budget, the aim of the MRFF was to build towards capital of $20 billion and utilise the returns from this fund for HMR investment. As of March 2019, the fund contained just under of $9 billion (with $7.8 billion scheduled to be added in 2019–20), yielding average annual returns of 4%.[2] In 2019–20, the MRFF is expected to distribute $393 million.

In contrast to the NHMRC, which expends most of the MREA on investigator-initiated research, the MRFF is primarily focused on supporting priority-driven research. Priorities are determined by the Minister

1 https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/funding/data-research/research-funding-data

2 https://www.finance.gov.au/australian-government-investment-funds/medical-research-future-fund/investment-performance-and/

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for Health, with advice from the Australian Medical Research Advisory Board, and revised biennially. While the MRFF will undoubtedly provide a huge boost for Australian HMR investment, some details remain to be worked out regarding the transparency of the process by which schemes are determined and funding is awarded. In contrast to the NHMRC, which oversees an open call for applications and peer review of funding proposals for all of its funding schemes, the MRFF is administered by a range of different bodies, depending on the scheme. For example, MRFF grants have been administered by NHMRC, Department for Industry, Innovation and Science, MTPConnect or philanthropic organisations (e.g. CanTeen, CureMND Foundation, Australian Epilepsy Research Fund, Jean Hailes Foundation). To date, some but not all of the MRFF schemes have involved a transparent process for application and review.

ARC

The **Australian Research Council** (ARC) funds fundamental biological research but has an explicit policy to not fund HMR *per se*. Nonetheless, outcomes of basic and applied research supported by ARC research often have trickle-down benefits to health and medicine.

Overall, HMR investment in Australia has received a major boost in recent years due to the implementation of the MRFF. However, the majority of researchers still view the NHMRC as their most relevant source of funding, and the static budgetary allocations to this body over the past decade has placed increasing stress on the system. Reallocating a proportion of the MRFF to investigator-initiated research might help ease this burden. Finally, while HMR is faring much better than the physical and social sciences in terms of Australian government support, it still lags far behind research leaders like the US on the basis of per capita spending.

ASMR MRW® 2019

By Dr Laura Masters and Dr Amy Winship

The ASMR MRW® 2019 was held in the first week of June, with hundreds of participants attending events held across Hobart, Canberra, Sydney, Newcastle, Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. State and regional committees successfully ran scientific meetings and networking events for early and mid-career researchers, encouraging and supporting career and professional development. Congratulations to all the presentation award finalists and winners from all meetings held around the country.

This year the ASMR MRW® schools quiz garnered an impressive 1,462 entries across Australia. This reflects the high level of engagement from high school teachers, students and their communities seen at ASMR MRW® school events held across the country. Other outreach events, such as trivia nights and speed networking sessions, were incredibly popular and well attended.

An important feature of ASMR MRW® is the Gala dinners held in capital cities across Australia. These are an excellent opportunity to socialise and network with colleagues and key decision makers with influence in our sector. Dinners were attended by both State and Federal Politicians, institute heads and government department representatives who heard directly from our President, Dr Yazbek, on the importance of sustained funding for our sector and the critical role of peer review in this process. Complementing this and highlighting the talents of the Australian research community, were the thrilling snapshot presentations of science and discovery from students as well as emerging and established research leaders.

A notable highlight of ASMR MRW® is the ASMR Medallist tour. The 2019 Medallist, Dr Elizabeth Finkel, a trailblazing Australian science journalist with a background in biomedical research, gripped audiences on each occasion she spoke. Dr Finkel is not afraid to tackle complex and controversial issues. The ASMR considers science communication

Queensland Gala Dinner.

Dr Si Ming Man, winner of the Commonwealth Minister's Award for Excellence in Health and Medical Reseach. Announced at the Vic Gala Dinner.

ASMR Speed Networking Event
at Science on the Swan, WA.

to be the most important bridge between scientists, the community and policy makers. In awarding her its medal, the ASMR recognized Dr Finkel's work and has highlighted her position as a pioneer and leader of this field. She said "There has never been a more important time to broadcast the scientific method to the general public. We have entered the post-truth era. We're back to a dark age, where people seem unable to differentiate between fanatical hype and the evidence of experts." The transcript from her live ABC televised National Press Club address was published online in *The Conversation* and even made international headlines in the *Otago Daily Times*. Dr Finkel was also interviewed on Sydney ABC Radio's *Focus* program and live on FIVEaa Radio Adelaide. You can read more from Dr Finkel on page 8.

These activities would not have been possible without generous sponsors, whom we thank for their support. It is also important to acknowledge the time and effort the members of state and regional committees dedicate to running a successful ASMR MRW®, as well as other ASMR activities throughout the year. This serves as a great reminder for ASMR Members to get involved in their state or regional committee and ASMR MRW® events next year!

Associate Professor James Chong,
winner of the Alan Skyring Memorial Award.
Presented at the NSW Gala Dinner.

ACT ASMR State Committee
at the New Investigator Forum.

Postgraduate Award Finalists, Tasmania.

SA Gala Dinner.

WA ASMR State Committee and Board representatives at the WA Gala Dinner.

ASMR MRW® 2019 Reflection

By Dr Elizabeth Finkel

Being nominated the ASMR medallist was daunting. How do you follow an act given by Nobel prize winners, knights and dames? The answer is you try not to think about that and trust that the ASMR president and committee know what they're doing.

I figured my job was to tell a heroic tale about how medical research pays off. As it happened, I could oblige because I'd just penned a story on gene therapy for *The Monthly*. It was all thanks to Megan Donnell, a one-time IT manager and mother of two children suffering from the terminal genetic illness Sanfilippo syndrome. She alerted me to the reality that gene therapy had arrived.

I knew the story would cover the bases. It originated in blue sky research with the cracking of the genetic code in the 1960s. The idea of replacing faulty DNA instantly captured the imagination of scientists and the public but delivering gene therapy involved a roller coaster ride of 30 years. I could describe the current arrival of gene therapy from the viewpoint of a consumer, Megan Donnell. I could also flag the imminent disruption to the current model of delivering and paying for medicine.

Sabra Lane, Dr Elizabeth Finkel,
Dr Roger Yazbek and Professor Anne Kelso

The strength of this story made me brave enough to do the tour. But I found the story continued to deliver, and to surprise me.

Researchers operate under the premise that the threads of their research, though at times appearing tiny and insignificant, will braid together with others to one day deliver a major new strand of medicine. In reprising my ASMR address seven times, not only did the story sharpen, the truth of this premise hit me with ever greater force.

For instance, my address began with a short bio which described work I had done in the mid-1980s as a post-doctoral researcher unveiling the genes that guide the differentiation of a mushy fruit fly embryo. Twenty years later in 2005, I was closely involved with the Australian debate to legalize a technique known as 'therapeutic cloning'. It allows skin cells to be turned into brain or other tissue types, and relies in large part on the differentiation genes we had identified in the fruit fly.

On the afternoon before the ASMR Sydney talk, Megan Donnell closed the loop on these disparate threads. We met at the ABC studios for a joint radio interview. She told me that her foundation had just won funding to clone brain tissue from the skin cells of children with Sanfilippo. These "brains in a dish" would be used to screen for drugs that might rescue the dying brain cells of children with Sanfilippo.

Most of the ASMR talks were preceded by presentations from PhD students. They showcased the particular flavour of medical research. Unlike me with my fruit flies, these researchers began with a clear image of patients in front of their eyes.

Professor Anne Kelso and
Dr Elizabeth Finkel
(ASMR 2019 Medalist)

But as they set about to discover a new inroad to the problem, they were fired by the same zeal of discovery. It was an inspiring blend of humanism and intellectual pursuit. I hope my telling of the story of gene therapy and other vignettes will help sustain them as they soldier through their own piece of the scientific frontier.

The audience for the ASMR tour also included politicians and policymakers. From the feedback I received, I think they greatly valued getting a snapshot of gene therapy and the opportunities and challenges for Australia. My larger message about the heightened mission of science journalism in a post truth era, was also highly resonant.

In conclusion, I am exceedingly grateful to Roger Yazbek and his committee for giving me the platform of ASMR medallist. Making this journey amongst medical researchers, policy makers and students taught me the truth of my own tale.

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Society for Free Radical Research (Australasia)
Society for Reproductive Biology
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