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## President's Report

Dr Peter O'Loughlin, April 2001

In the lead up to the Federal election later this year Australians will be showered with catch phrases such as "Knowledge Nation" and "Backing Australia's Ability". The policies of the Labor and Liberal parties, respectively, have strong relevance and important objectives for medical researchers. The focus of these policies on investment in the future through funding innovation efforts such as medical research must not be lost under the pressure of other political issues. The "Platform for Health and Medical Research", issued by the Board in December, gave strong support for the full implementation of the recommendations of the Batterham report and the report of the Innovation Summit Implementation Group, while putting these reports into a health and medical research context. Letters and the Platform document were sent to all federal parliamentarians in the lead up to their respective announcements.

The Prime Minister's "Backing Australia's Ability" innovation statement on 29th January announced a \$2.9 billion, five-year plan to boost Australia's research, development and innovation. *The announcement promises to deliver a substantial number of the recommendations of the Batterham and ISIG reports, but only describes an implementation schedule for a portion of the promises.* A defined implementation process must be established. We are in the process of organising meetings with myself, President-Elect Peter Schofield and key members of the cabinet and shadow ministry to highlight the

need for the full implementation of the "Backing Australia's Ability" innovation statement and adoption of an implementation process and timetable.

The Labor Party's "Knowledge Nation" statement promises to: improve education and training at all levels;

encourage innovation and boost investment in research and development; reverse the 'brain drain' by doubling the number of research fellowships in our universities and creating fellowships to attract the world's best researchers; and ensure the benefits of information and communications technologies are shared by all Australians. *Specific projections for Labor's proposals must be established.*



### ASMR MRW 2001

The flagship event on the ASMR calendar, Medical Research Week is our major vehicle to raise the profile of Australia's medical research endeavour. Our role in this promotion has been recognised this year by a \$135,000 grant from the Department of Health and Aged Care to expand our outreach activities. This year in addition to the MRW events that we usually hold there will be a national focus on medical research expos expanding on the events that have been held in some States in the past.

*The ASMR Medallist for 2001 is Professor Alan Bernstein, former*

Director of the Samuel Lunenfeld Institute at the University of Toronto and the newly appointed President of the Canadian Health Research Institutes. He will address major events in most capital cities and the National Press Club in Canberra speaking on the increasingly positive attitude in many governments towards funding investments in higher education and medical research and the effects of structural reforms in these areas.

## **Australian Health & Medical Research Congress 2002**

This initiative of the ASMR is intended to provide a forum to bring together multiple medical research societies and associations at a truly international standard meeting. The economy of scale of this meeting will enable the participating societies to attract a significant number of the world's best scientists to take part in annual scientific meetings and symposia that are integrated into the Congress. To date there are 6 Societies including ASMR that are holding their annual scientific meetings and 18 further Societies that are holding symposia as part of the Congress.

## **ABC Science Unit**

In late 2000 there was national concern that funding and structural changes in the ABC would threaten the future of the Science Unit. The ASMR wrote to all federal politicians to support the need for a strong ABC Science Unit. Highlighting that the ABC plays an essential role in the communication and analysis of scientific, technological and

health-related issues and events. These issues include some of the most important facing Australia in the 21st century. We recommended that:

■ *The ABC maintains a leading role in the broadcast coverage of science, technology and health issues.*

■ *This role requires as a minimum a capacity for specialised news and investigative reporting and ideally a capacity for the production of feature-documentary programs for radio and television.*

■ *To meet this goal the ABC should retain journalists, researchers and producers with specialised expertise in the analysis of scientific, technical and health issues.*

Many politicians have provided detailed responses to our concerns.

## **NHMRC Research Fellowships scheme**

The changes to the Research Fellowships scheme, including the cessation of new Research Fellow level appointments has been of some concern to the medical research community. When these announcements were made, there were no replacement support programs aimed at researchers with 3 to 9 years of postdoctoral experience.

*The NHMRC have recently indicated that a scheme to address the needs of this group of postdoctoral researchers will be offered in 2001 for funding in 2002.*

For biomedical researchers the conditions for the award will be similar to those for the RD Wright in the past.

## **Obituary**

The Board was saddened to learn Professor Barry Firkin lost his battle with leukaemia on Jan 12, 2001.



*Professor Barry Firkin*

He was the driving force with Jim McRae and Alan Skyring in establishing ASMR and its first President in 1961; he was also the first financial member of the Society (7/9/61).

Appointed a life member of ASMR in 1983, Barry Firkin will long be remembered and missed by friends and colleagues. The "Firkin Oration", presented by many eminent scientists over the years has become an integral part of our National Scientific Conference. We owe a debt of gratitude to Barry Firkin; his ideals and aspirations for Australian Health and Medical Research driven by courage, imagination and initiative, founded the Society,

The Board of Directors, on behalf of the Membership of ASMR, extend condolences to Barry's wife Ruth, his four children and six grandchildren.

*Peter O'Loughlin  
President, ASMR  
April 2001*

Over the last four years, the NHMRC Research Committee has been changing the ways in which it supports Australian health and medical research. “Reshaping NHMRC Research Support”, has focussed on improving the ways in which we support:

- \* *research directly (Project and Program Grants);*
- \* *the national underpinning of research (National Research Capacity categories, eg, Equipment Grants, Program in Medical v Genomics); and*
- \* *people who undertake the research (from postgraduate students through to the most senior Research Fellows).*

“Reshaping” has been driven by a number of factors. These include the merger of the previous MRC and PHRDC into a single Research Committee in 1997, the Government’s responses to the Health & Medical Research Strategic Review (Wills Report), and the rapid changes in international health and medical research. Our aim has been to open up our schemes; to have specific and transparent policies; to make the system more flexible; to provide more support of longer duration; to provide teams with more stable support (and thus allow more innovation); and to provide a simpler system with more choice.

The development of talented people into excellent independent and self-directed researchers during the postdoctoral period is one of the most important goals for Australian health and medical research. Research Committee has been actively considering this issue for some time. For many years, we have had excellent schemes for Australian biomedical researchers wishing to study overseas immediately after gaining their PhD - the C J Martin and the Neil Hamilton Fairley Fellowships (for biomedical and clinical researchers respectively). Three years ago, the Research Committee launched the Sidney Sax Fellowship, an equivalent scheme for public health researchers, though to date there have been relatively few applicants. The Peter Doherty Fellowship is for researchers who for various reasons cannot travel overseas during the immediate postdoctoral years, enabling them to enhance their postdoctoral training by changing institutions. It too has supported many excellent researchers. All these early postdoctoral fellowships have been for four years.

After this initial postdoctoral period, researchers have relied on a variety of other means of support. R D Wright Fellowships have been available,

usually awarded to researchers four or five years post-PhD. The block-funded institutes had unnamed “slots” in which to appoint postdoctoral fellows.

However most postdocs (estimated to be more than 250 at any one time in recent years) were supported on NHMRC Project Grants as ROs or SROs.



Some specific problems have become apparent over the last decade. For example, the range of support mechanisms has not been in tune with the expectations of many postdoc fellows. Very few public health or clinical researchers have become R D Wright Fellows and it is clear that this scheme does not fit well with the personal profile, age, professional experience and career development of many researchers in these fields. The number of RDWs able to be funded in the tight funding years in the mid-90s disappointed many. Those on Project Grant support often found this difficult, though many became successful NHMRC Research Fellowship applicants. Project grants will remain an important vehicle for career development.

After much consideration and discussion though 1998-2000, the Research Committee decided to address the issue of postdoctoral support decisively in 2001. It announced that it would not advertise the RD Wright Fellowships until it had developed policy to address the postdoctoral training issue. Note that this was a delay in announcing, not a cancellation, of postdoc support.

Research Committee will consider recommendations from the Fellowship Committee and the Training Awards Committee in May and we expect to announce a call for applications for funding in 2002 shortly afterwards. These recommendations may be summarized as:

- Changes to the R D Wright scheme, to ensure ongoing support for researchers at an important development stage of their career. The criteria for the award will be addressed and the duration of the award may be increased). This scheme will be directed towards biomedical research.
- Introduction of new postdoctoral career development awards for both clinical and public health/population health researchers with criteria explicitly developed for these types of researcher

# *Investing in BioInnovation for WA's future*

## **Last March marked the opening of the new Biomedical R&D**

**Alliance**, a unique collaboration of biomedical research institutes coming together with University, Industry and Government leaders in Western Australia. The four major institutes include Lions Eye Institute, TVW Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Western Australian Biomedical Research Institute, and Western Australian Institute for Medical Research.

Undoubtedly, the result of the Biomedical R&D Alliance will be shared knowledge, a quickening of discoveries and development of technology, and commercialisation of research to put Western Australia at the forefront of innovation and growth in the biotechnology sector.

A major benefit will be an increase in jobs and economy. It is hoped that Western Australia will seize these opportunities and invest in partnerships, people and infrastructure to help build a healthier State.

## **WA Biomedical Research Institute**

The Western Australian Biomedical Research Institute (WABRI), which was launched on Tuesday 28th November, 2000 by the Deputy Premier, Hendy Cowan, promises to become a collaborative enterprise for commercialisation of research in Western Australia.

The Institute is a world-class establishment funded under the state government's Centres of Excellence programme and it gives researchers at Murdoch a realistic chance of finding treatments for some of the world's most persistent diseases. Infectious, autoimmune diseases such as malaria, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancers such as leukaemia are being targeted at the bio-molecular level by the outstanding researchers in WABRI, in which Murdoch University shares a node with Curtin University.

*Dr Cassandra Lawson,  
ASMR Director*

## ***NHMRC Support, Postdoctoral Period. continued***

career profiles.

- Consideration of how the Sidney Sax Fellowships and the recently introduced Practitioner Fellowships articulate with these.

- Discussion of co-funding possibilities with other bodies.

Research Committee has budgeted for a substantial increase in support for all its "people" schemes over the next few years.

Finally, one of the most important changes for postdocs may be the New Program Grant. These have some of the advantageous features of the old Institute Block grant, but unlike these, will be available to all on a competitive basis. These substantive grants are fully "one-line" and CIs and postdocs seeking support will be able to be employed under these grants without further reference to NHMRC. Furthermore, one of the key aims of the New Program Grant scheme is the

training and career development of researchers, relevant to both the initial awards of the Grant and to reapplication.

Research Committee hopes that these changes mean that better support will be available to researchers in all areas of health and medical research during the crucial postdoctoral years in the future. There can never be certainty during this period, since not all successful entrants into health and medical research are destined to achieve the heights needed for a successful career in research. However, the Research Committee's aim is to ensure that those with potential get their opportunity to show it and we ensure that the leaders in Australian research in the coming years emerge strongly to serve Australian health needs through research in the future. We hope that these changes will provide a better environment for this to occur.

*Professor Warwick Anderson  
Chair, NHMRC Research Committee*





## ASMR Medallist 2001

*Dr Alan Bernstein*



*Director*

*Canadian Institutes of Health Research*

Dr. Alan Bernstein is known internationally both as a researcher and as a scientific leader. His pioneering research in the area of cancer, hematopoiesis and gene therapy remain landmarks in their field.

Dr. Bernstein has also played both national and local roles in fostering a broader vision of health research. He was a member of the National Task Force on Health Research, established by Health Minister Allan Rock in 1998, that recommended the establishment of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research with an integrative and comprehensive approach to health research.

As a scientific leader, Dr. Bernstein was highly successful in building and nurturing the Lunenfeld Institute into one of Canada's premier health research institutes. He understands Canada's health research climate and is a valued consultant for many worldwide agencies, institutions and companies, including the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Dr. Bernstein was the first Anne Tanenbaum Chair in Molecular and Developmental Biology at the Lunenfeld from 1990-2000 and has also received numerous awards and honours for his work including the Genetics Society of Canada Award of Excellence, the Robert L. Noble Award from the National Cancer Institute of Canada, the Royal Society of Canada's McLaughlin Medal and the 2000 Henry Friesen Award sponsored by the Canadian Society for Clinical Investigation and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons.

## Events

ASMR Medical Research Week  
2001 features -

- **Tour by ASMR Medallist**  
Dr Bernstein will speak at dinners in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth .  
Dr Michael Wooldridge will present the ASMR Medal at the Canberra Press Club.
- **Expositions**  
Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Hobart, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth
- **Scientific Meetings**  
Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide
- **Victorian Premier's Award**
- **AMGEN Medical Researcher Award Luncheon**  
Sydney
- **Public Lectures and Symposium**  
Melbourne, Sydney, Perth
- **Schools Activities**  
All States
- **Biotechnology forum**  
Perth
- **Research Investment & Commercialisation for Health Forum (RICH)**  
Melbourne
- **Hospital MRF displays, Posters and Grand Rounds**  
Hobart & Perth

## ASMR: an overview

*The Australian Society for Medical Research was founded in 1961 to foster excellence in Australian health and medical research and to promote community understanding and support.*

- **The Society currently represents 113,000 Australians** (1100 Ordinary Members, 37 specialist societies, 7 medical colleges, 13 foundation associates).
- **ASMR's Platform Policy 1996** proposed the doubling of the NHMRC budget and targetted Federal MP's, educating them to support the adoption of this recommendation by the HMRSR and its subsequent endorsement by Government.
- **ASMR recommended Capital Gains Taxation be reformed** to permit venture capital investment in AHMR. This recommendation was endorsed by the Ralph Review.
- **ASMR creates awareness of HMR in the community.** ASMR Medical Research Week attracts significant media coverage nationwide. Expositions, scientific meetings, lectures, schools seminars, commercialisation fora and the ASMR Medallist all raise the profile of HMR in Australia.
- **ASMR Public opinion polls.** Data assessing attitudes of Australians to HMR are persuasive instruments to government.
- **ASMR Workforce Reviews.** Two workforce reviews have provided data to support ASMR submissions to various bodies concerning working conditions, funding opportunities and career development for Australian biomedical researchers.
- **ASMR in consultation.** The Society is frequently consulted by Government, media and funding bodies. ASMR has organised press conferences, fora and discipline conferences and is frequently quoted on radio, television and in print.
- **ASMR Submissions to Government.** The Society actively pursues the interests of Australian health and medical research through its many submissions to Government at both national and state level.
- **ASMR's Platform Policy 2000** broadly supports the recommendations of the Batterham Review and the report of the Innovation Summit Implementation Group. The Society will continue to push for the full implementation of the ASMR Platform Policy 2000.

### **Tall Poppy Dinner**

The Tall Poppy Dinner celebrates Queensland's past and present science heroes and their achievements, including the presentation of the Young Tall Poppy Awards, as well as launching Queensland National Science Week. Tuesday, May 1st 2001, Brisbane Hilton.

Contact: AIPS, P O Box 145, Balmain, NSW.  
Telephone: 02 9810 5642 Fax: 02 9810 2406  
Email: [ainsliethomas@iprimus.com.au](mailto:ainsliethomas@iprimus.com.au)

# 40th ASMR National Scientific Conference

Marriott Hotel, Gold Coast, Queensland 25th -  
27th November 2001

## ***BioInnovation: The Future of Medical Research***

On behalf of the Local Organising Committee, we would like to invite you to attend the 40th ASMR NSC on the Gold Coast. The meeting has an excellent record of providing new information and stimulating debate for the Society's members and this year's conference will be no exception. Proposed symposia will cover a variety of themes including 'Therapeutic Applications of Proteases', 'Functional and Structural Genomics', 'Glycotherapeutics and Drug Design', 'Innovations in Diagnostics and Therapeutics', 'Molecular Genetics of Cancer', 'Therapeutic Applications of Proteases' and 'The Pot of Gold at the End of the Research Rainbow' (discussing issues relating to commercialisation, industry linkage, patenting and ethics). As well there are Research Highlights Sessions and the NARF and Viertel Symposia. The Firkin Orator in 2001 is Dr Mike Dexter, Director of the Wellcome Trust UK and the AWT Oration will be delivered by Professor Peter Andrews, co-Director, Institute for Molecular Biosciences.

When making your decision to attend, allow yourself to be swayed by the good time you can

expect at a conference on the Gold Coast in late Spring. The Marriott Hotel offers fantastic facilities to all delegates and there are a variety of affordable accommodation packages. Details will be found on our special conference web page:



[www.asmr-nsc2001.conf.au](http://www.asmr-nsc2001.conf.au)

### ***Call for Abstracts***

Once again members are encouraged to submit abstracts for inclusion in either symposia, free communication sessions or poster displays. Full instructions will be found on the web page. Poster and oral presenters are eligible for a number of significant prizes and a feature of the 2001 program will be the reports by the inaugural winners of the Medibank Private Student Research Awards, before the presentations to this years Student Research winners. Abstracts should be lodged by September 21, 2001.

*All enquiries, pre-registrations and submissions are best made from*  
[www.asmr-nsc2001.conf.au](http://www.asmr-nsc2001.conf.au)

Assoc. Professor Lyn Griffiths  
Convenor, ASMR NSC 2001

## ***\$5,000.00***

### ***ASMR Research Award 2001***

This Award will support a postgraduate student member nearing completion of their studies or a recently graduated postdoctoral ASMR member to undertake research in laboratories outside their home city.

The Award specifically excludes support for conference attendance.

Applications close at 5:00pm on Friday September 28, 2001.

Full details from:  
[www.asmr.org.au/resfund/intro.html](http://www.asmr.org.au/resfund/intro.html)

## **TOXICITY TESTING**

Pharmatox is a well established toxicology laboratory working to international guidelines of the OECD and is a GLP and GMP registered laboratory, specialising in pre-clinical toxicology including pharmacokinetics, toxicokinetics and a wide range of pharmacopoeal tests.

**Pharmatox**

For further information contact:  
Dr A. G. Bolt  
Tel: (02) 9654 1623 Fax: (02) 9654 1754

## Medibank Private Young Medical Researchers Awards

The inaugural winners of the Medibank Private Young Medical Researchers Awards were announced at the 39th ASMR National Scientific Conference held at the Sofitel Hotel in Melbourne in November 2000.

The winners were **Karen Bentley** from the AIDS Molecular Biology Unit, National Centre for HIV Virology at Macfarlane Burnet Centre in Melbourne, **Tanya de Jong** from the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research in Melbourne and **Paul Anderson** from the Division of Biochemistry, Institute of



*Karen Bentley, Paul Anderson and Tanya de Jong*

Medical & Veterinary Science, Adelaide. They won from a field of 74 nominees nationwide. The winners received an award of \$5000 worth of international air travel, a week's accommodation and entry to an international conference of their choice.



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## Events

### ASMR Medical Research Week

June 4-10

Email: [asmr@world.net](mailto:asmr@world.net)

### Asian Medical Students' Conference 2001

July 8-18 Melbourne Vic  
[www.amsa.org.au/amsc/programlist.htm](http://www.amsa.org.au/amsc/programlist.htm)

### 9th International Congress of Toxicology

July 8-12, Brisbane Qld  
[www.uq.edu.au/ICT9/](http://www.uq.edu.au/ICT9/)

### ComBio2001

Sept 30 Oct 4, Canberra, ACT  
Email: [asbmb@camtech.net.au](mailto:asbmb@camtech.net.au)

### Children's Cancer Inst. Aust

International Symposium  
October 7-9, Bondi Beach, NSW.

[www.asmr.org.au/conferences/ci.pdf](http://www.asmr.org.au/conferences/ci.pdf)

### 2001 Joint Annual Scientific Meeting of HSANZ and ASBT

Oct 21-24,  
Brisbane Convention Centre  
[www.hsanzasbt2001.im.com.au](http://www.hsanzasbt2001.im.com.au)

### ASMR 40th NSC

Marriot Resort Hotel, Gold Coast, Qld. November 24 - 27  
Email: [mp@asnevents.net.au](mailto:mp@asnevents.net.au)

### Australian Health & Medical Research Congress

Melbourne, November 2002  
Email: [mp@asnevents.net.au](mailto:mp@asnevents.net.au)

### ASMR Directors 2001

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