



# the *Australian Society* for *Medical Research*

**Newsletter**  
July 2003

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## INSIDE

### President's Report

Dr Moira Clay

PAGE 3

### ASMR Medical Research Week <sup>(R)</sup> 2003

PAGES 4 & 5

### NHMRC

Professor John Shine

PAGE 6

### NHMRC and Committees

PAGE 7

### Awards and Prizes

PAGE 8

## The difficult path to discovery: finding the cash, and keeping it

By Mark Metherell, SMH

When Michael Wooldridge wangled an unprecedented doubling of medical research funding back in 1999, it seemed there was at last a national government prepared to do more than make the right noises about health science. The \$614 million over six years announced in the Federal Budget was welcomed as visionary for the future of health and medical research by the NHMRC's then chairman Richard Larkins. It would help put Australia "at the forefront of medical research", Professor Larkins said. That was then. Move on four years and there are twitches of unease among some Canberra insiders about the future shape of medical research funding. At a time when the Howard Government is moving towards winding back government in areas like health (the Medicare changes), education (university fees) and in CSIRO (continued staff cuts and push to privatise science), the pessimists are beginning to wonder whether the NHMRC might be next.

Dr Wooldridge's adroit lobbying of health policy and his presence on the powerful Expenditure Review Committee of Cabinet played a crucial role in the research funding coup. His successor, Kay Patterson, has sought to highlight the importance of medical research in improving the everyday lives of Australians, but does not bring the same clout.

Despite recent reported comments by expatriate Australian, Elizabeth Blackburn, now at the University of California, talking down Australia as a place "for exciting science" the evidence is that Australian medical research is building on its healthy record. The funding growth has deepened Australia's standing in the big games like cancer, infectious disease, diabetes and stems cells and international citations and collaborations bear this out. The top names, if not Professor Blackburn, are returning home to bear this out and Nobel laureate, Peter Doherty is among them. The advocates also point to the states taking up the research agenda, particularly Victoria and Queensland.

But medical research funding is to come under scrutiny by the Government in the next year as it works out what happens after the six-year funding dollop ends in 2005. This almost certainly will involve examination by the

Continued page 2

### Election of Directors to the Board of The Australian Society for Medical Research 2003 - 2005

Call for Nominations  
to fill six (6) vacancies on the  
Board of ASMR

Nomination form included with  
this issue and available from  
[www.asmr.org.au/nominate.pdf](http://www.asmr.org.au/nominate.pdf)

## The difficult path to discovery: finding the cash, and keeping it (cont.)

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, although the NHMRC at this stage only acknowledges that a review is being prepared for by the Department of Health, as recommended after three years by the Wills Report which recommended the big funding boost.

The pesky thing for the Government is that while medical “breakthroughs” make sexy stories — hardly a day passes without medical research hitting the headlines — the

original funding decision rarely rates a mention.

Will the Government be keen to continue lavishing research dollars, if there is no credit from the voters?

— *Mark Metherell, writes on health policy for the Sydney Morning Herald.*

## \$5000

### ASMR Research Award 2003

This Award will support a postgraduate student member of the Society nearing completion of their studies or a recently graduated postdoctoral member to undertake a short period of research in a laboratory outside their home city.

*The award specifically excludes support for conference attendance and travel for an extended period of postdoctoral studies.*

Further information from:

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

## Events

### “Hormones and the Heart, a tribute to Professor John Watson Funder”

September 18 and 19, 2003

Sheraton Southgate

Further information from

[www.meetingsfirst.com.au/meetings](http://www.meetingsfirst.com.au/meetings)

### American Society for Bone and Mineral Research 25th Annual Meeting and Anniversary Celebration

September 19 - 23 2003

Minneapolis Convention Centre

Minneapolis, Minnesota USA

[www.asbmr.org](http://www.asbmr.org)

### The Australian Health and Medical Research Congress 2004

November 21-26 2004

Darling Harbour, Sydney, NSW

email: [mp@asnevents.net.au](mailto:mp@asnevents.net.au)

## “The Cycle of Life - From Cells to Systems”

### 42nd ASMR National Scientific Conference November 22-25, 2003

A number of symposiums will expand on the theme  
“The Cycle of Life: From Cells to Systems”.

Join us at the Stamford Grand, Glenelg SA



Many opportunities for participants to present their work  
and in the process, be considered for a number of  
significant prizes.

**Abstract Deadline: August 18, 2003**

Further information: [www.asmr.org.au/conferences](http://www.asmr.org.au/conferences)

## President's Report

### ASMR Medical Research Week<sup>(R)</sup>

ASMR Medical Research Week<sup>(R)</sup> 2003 was a resounding success. The week saw extensive national media coverage together with a series of public outreach events across the country including Medical Research Expos, Career Days, high profile public lectures, the inaugural rural road show (in South Australia) and "Hands On" workshops for schools. Once again, with the support of the Department of Health and Ageing and a long list of national and state sponsors we were able to undertake a national public outreach event.

The State Scientific Meetings were enormously popular this year. Record high registrations were achieved, highlighting the importance of these events as a vehicle for up and coming researchers to communicate the outcomes of their research to an audience of their peers. Congratulations also to the researchers who received recognition of their contributions to Australian health and medical research through a series of high profile awards nationwide.

A major focus of the week was the national lecture tour by the 2003 ASMR Medalist, Professor Terry Dwyer. Terry delivered a powerful and timely message to key stakeholders during the tour about the need for Australia to maintain the momentum created by the doubling of the NHMRC budget which will soon come to an end. He highlighted the exceptional contributions of Australian health and medical research to better health and a

stronger economy. The warning bells he rang regarding the temptation to regard our health research effort as a short term funding focus were powerful and timely.

### Political Advocacy

The inaugural ASMR Exceptional Returns Forum was held during ASMR Medical Research Week<sup>(R)</sup>. The forum was attended by leading researchers together with representatives of the NHMRC, ARC, AAMRI, the Public Health Association, the Australian Academy of Science, the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee, Research Australia, the pharmaceutical industry and Medicines Australia.

A key outcome of the forum was the launch of a grass roots campaign. The campaign is a call to action for all ASMR members to communicate the outcomes of their research to both the public and politicians in order to create maximum awareness of the exceptional returns of Australian health and medical research and facilitate its long term support by Federal and State Governments, private industry and philanthropic organizations. You will be hearing much more about this in the weeks to come. The key milestone for the grass roots campaign is October 2003. This milestone represents the deadline to get health and medical research onto the agenda for the crucial 2004 budget. A rapid response to the campaign is essential.

Many of you will be aware that the ASMR has commissioned an independent economic assessment of the expenditure on health and medical research in Australia and the economic returns of this investment,



*Dr Moira Clay  
ASMR President*

with a working title of "Exceptional Returns: The Value of Investing in Health and Medical Research in Australia". The findings of this study will be crucial to achieving the October deadline.

### ASMR NSC

This year, the ASMR NSC will be held at the Stamford Grand in Adelaide from November 22-25. The meeting has the topical theme of "The Cycle of Life: From Cells to Systems". There will be many opportunities for participants to present their work and be considered for a number of significant prizes. A series of key symposia have been confirmed involving high profile national and international researchers. The Hanson Symposium "Hormones in Cancer" and the one day symposium on "Organisation and Control of Movement", which will be held in conjunction with the conference, should not be missed. The NHMRC will also be presenting a symposium on directions for the new triennium which will be of great interest to all! Registrations are now open ([www.asmr-nsc.org.au](http://www.asmr-nsc.org.au)) with excellent rates offered to ASMR members and students. The abstract deadline is August 18.



## ASMR Medical Research Week<sup>(R)</sup> 2003



*Professor Terry Dwyer, Senator Kay Patterson and Dr Moira Clay at the National Press Club*

*The Board of Directors of The Australian Society for Medical Research wish to thank Professor Terry Dwyer AM, ASMR Medallist 2003, for his participation in ASMR Medical Research Week<sup>(R)</sup> delivering the HMR message to politicians and stakeholders.*

*Professor Dwyer spoke in Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, attracting strong media attention*

- **Expos**
- **Public Lectures and Debates**
- **Career Days**
- **Schools days**
- **Scientific meetings**
- **National Prizes and Awards**
- **State Prizes and Awards**

**Record numbers attended Scientific Meetings in Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth**



Red Symons, MC for the Melbourne Dinner



Dr Ricky Johnstone, Winner of the AMGEN Medical Researcher Award 2003



Prof. John Shine, Dr Moira Clay (cntr) and Prof. Judy Black at the Sydney Dinner

Associate Professor Levon Khachigian wins the Commonwealth Health Minister's Award for Excellence in Health and Medical Research



Associate Professor Khachigian (right) receives the Award from Hon. Kevin Andrews, Minister for Ageing, at the Melbourne Dinner



# ASMR Medical Research Week <sup>(R)</sup> 2003



Nicole Verrills  
Winner of the University of Sydney Medal



*Professor Alan Coates, Nicole Verrills and Dr Maria Kavallaris.*



The Expo in Rundle Mall, Adelaide, drew record crowds

The Board of Directors of The Australian Society for Medical Research wish to thank the major national sponsor of ASMR Medical Research Week<sup>(R)</sup> The Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and all other national and state sponsors



*Dr Juleen Cavanaugh (ACT Convenor) and Hon Bob McMullan MP at the ACT EXPO*

Our thanks to Karen Edwards, Multimedia, JCSMR for this image



*Some 'hands on' opportunities at the Western Australian Expo*

## Beanie Babies!

Our special thanks to Ty Australia who provided Dottie Dalmations, Bears and Frogs for our Schools and Expo activities



Dr Rohan Baker faces the cameras at the Canberra Expo.

Our thanks to Karen Edwards, Multimedia, JCSMR for this image

The Board of Directors of The Australian Society for Medical Research extend congratulations and thanks to the tireless state committees for their efforts and achievements in bringing these events to the health and medical research community, to stakeholders and to the general public.

The Wills Review in 1999 laid out a blueprint for the future development of health and medical research in Australia. The Review findings and recommendations were widely endorsed with the centrepiece being a “Virtuous Cycle” of partnerships between researchers, government and industry. Over the past few years, implementation of the Review has seen a doubling of the NHMRC budget to nearly \$400M in 2004, a range of structural reforms to the granting schemes and Fellowships and changes to taxation regimes to encourage commercial investment in research. These welcome initiatives have had major impact on the momentum of Australian health and medical research and on the morale of researchers. However much remains to be done to fully realise the potential clearly articulated in the Wills Review.

### **Challenges**

The return on investment from the doubling of NHMRC funding is very substantial, but a clear and compelling case needs to be presented to government to ensure that this funding level is maintained and built upon in upcoming years. The structural reforms to the NHMRC have only been partially completed and priority needs to be placed on attracting scientific expertise into the Office to complement the excellent professionalism of the administrative staff. This also requires additional resources and a closer partnership needs to be developed with the Dept. of Health to maximise our ability to deliver the benefits of health and medical research to the Australian community. Specific attention needs to be paid to the Fellowships Scheme, at the very core of NHMRC activities, to ensure that career development is maximised with an appropriate balance of established senior investigators but with ample opportunities for younger researchers to develop their careers. Relationships with industry, although continually improving, are still at an early stage. The recognised excellence of basic, clinical and public health research in Australia provides exciting opportunities for industry. However, local industry is often not well equipped to grasp these opportunities.

### **Future Directions**

Strong and effective partnerships remain the way forward for the NHMRC and Australian health and medical research. Clearly we need to build on the partnership with government - increased and sustainable funding for our basic research effort and

with State and Federal governments to address the pressing need of adequate infrastructure to cover the real costs of research.

We also need to be far more proactive in developing joint initiatives with other government agencies. For example, the ARC has enjoyed a similar expansion of their funding base at a time when the fundamental science underpinning biology (and computer science) is just as relevant to medical research as it is to reptile ecology. We will explore ways to work more closely with the ARC, CSIRO and other science agencies to initiate and fund collaborative research projects across the country. Recognising the particular challenges of Australian pharmaceutical companies with relatively little scientific expertise based locally, we will explore innovative ways to encourage partnerships between academia and industry, taking full advantage of the focus and commitment of small “spin-off” biotech groups to act as “catalysts” to help develop this important area.

Partnerships with non-government funding agencies is also high on the agenda. Already the NHMRC has entered into major agreements with the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation (US) and the Wellcome Trust (UK) to jointly fund outstanding research projects in diabetes and the Asia Pacific respectively. The Council is very keen to use such partnerships to gain significant leverage for NHMRC funding and to increase the opportunities for Australian researchers to gain access to additional international funding.

In the short time since my appointment as Chair of NHMRC, I have been most impressed with both the enthusiasm of the new Council and the dedication of the staff in the face of very limited resources. Together with the leadership of the Principal Committees and the support of the research community, the current triennium should see consolidation of the new base for health and medical research and implementation of a range of new initiatives to build on this momentum.



## NHMRC and Committees 2003-05

### NHMRC

*Chairperson, Prof. John Shine*  
A/Professor Ian Anderson  
Professor Judith Black  
Dr David Boadle  
Dr Kerry Breen  
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Dr Paul Dugdale  
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Professor Adele Green  
Prof Janet Greeley  
Dr Robert Hall  
Professor Brendan Kearney  
Ms Michele Kosky  
Prof Linda Kristjanson  
Dr Brian Lloyd  
Prof Tony McMichael  
Prof Kerin O'Dea  
Dr Sarah Robertson  
A/Professor Peter Sainsbury  
Professor Richard Smallwood  
Dr Jillian Sewell  
Prof Trang Thomas AM  
Dr David Whiteman  
Prof. Judith Whitworth AC

### Research Committee

*Chairperson, Prof. Judith Black*  
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A/ Professor Jacinta Elston  
Professor Richard Kefford  
Professor Nicos Nicola  
Professor Carol Armour  
Professor Phillip Robinson  
Dr Bronwyn Kingwell  
Professor Ronald Trent  
Professor Bruce Robinson  
Professor Terry Nolan  
Professor Tony Jorm  
Professor David Hill  
Ms Kim Boyer  
A/ Professor Gary Anderson  
Mrs Elizabeth Grant  
Mr Clive Deverall  
Dr Rosemary Aldrich  
Professor Tania Sorrell  
Dr Sarah Robertson  
Professor Don Cameron

### Health Advisory Committee

*Chairperson, Prof. Adele Green*

Dr Rosemary Aldrich  
Ms Kathryn Antioch  
Dr Katrine Baghurst  
Dr Branko Cesnik  
A/ Professor Judith Dwyer  
Dr Peter Greenberg  
Dr Noel Hayman  
Ms Sophie Hill  
Dr Peter Joseph  
Dr Andrew Langley  
Ms Sally Nathan  
Professor Frank Oberklaid  
Ms Fiona Stocker  
Dr Elizabeth Waters  
Dr Mark Wenitong  
Dr Helen Zorbas

### Aust. Health Ethics Committee

*Chairperson, Dr Kerry Breen*  
Ms Belinda Hope  
Prof. Bryan Campbell OAM  
Dr Christopher Cordner  
Mr Christopher Coyne  
Ms Terry Dunbar  
Dr Sandra Hacker  
Rev. Professor John Morgan  
Dr Wendy Rogers  
Professor Doreen Rosenthal  
Professor Tania Sorrell  
Mr Noel Spurr OAM  
Ms Fiona Stoker

## President's Report (continued)

### AH &MRC

Mark the date for the second Australian Health & Medical Research Congress (Sydney, November 25 - 29, 2004) in your diaries. We have now secured participation from a wide variety of professional societies. There is still time for your society to come on board. Congress planning is well on track and in the very capable hands of Maria Kavallaris who is convening the meeting and Levon Khachigian who is program convenor.

And finally.....

I am delighted to congratulate nine health and medical researchers honoured in the Queens Birthday Honours list for 2003. These individuals are a fine example of the excellence in Australian research across the disciplines of biomedical, clinical and public health research.

To close, some important thankyou's - firstly to ASMR's affiliate societies and other groups / organisations that have supported our public outreach events, the Australian Case Studies and the Access project. All of these activities are a vital part of achieving the goal of internationally competitive funding levels for Australian health and medical research. Thanks also to the many members of local ASMR committees for their enthusiastic and dedicated commitment, it is much valued and greatly appreciated! And a final thankyou to Cath West and Lexy Harris in the Executive Office for work above and beyond the call of duty, we could not do without you!

*Dr Moira Clay  
President, ASMR  
July 2003*



## Awards and Prize - ASMR MRW<sup>(R)</sup> 2003

### National Prize Winners

A/Prof. Levon Khachigian  
*Commonwealth Health Minister's Award  
for Excellence in Medical Research*  
Dr Ricky Johnstone  
*AMGEN Medical Researcher Award*

### New South Wales

Nicole Verrills - *University of Sydney  
Medal for Excellence.*  
Dr Prudence Stanford - *Johnson and  
Johnson Post-Doctoral Prize.*  
Roger Fahmy - *ASMR Technical Prize*  
Juliana Kwok - *Eli Lilly Best Student Oral  
Presentation*  
Joseph Daniel - *Roche Diagnostics Best  
Student Poster*  
Fares Al-Ejeh - *ASMR Young  
Investigator Award*

### Queensland

Shaun Scott - *Post-Doctoral Premier's  
Award*  
Uwe Dressel and Paul Dawson -  
*Finalists, Post-Doctoral Premier's Award*  
Kerry Boucaut - *Pre-Doctoral Premier's  
Award*  
Anita Thomas and Christelle Adolphe  
- *Finalists, Pre-Doctoral Premier's Award*  
Christelle Adolphe - *Best Student Oral  
Presentation*  
Chris Towne - *Best Student Poster  
Presentation*

### South Australia

Damien Belobradjic - *Holden Young  
Investigator Award for Excellence in  
Health and Medical Research*  
Cassandra McIver - *Second Place,  
Holden Young Investigator Award for  
Excellence in Health and Medical  
Research*  
Agatha Labrinidis - *BioRad New  
Investigator Award for Best Oral  
Presentation*

### South Australia (continued)

Claire Jessup - *BioRad New Investigator  
Award for Best Poster Presentation*  
Revecca Kakavanos - *Ross Wishart  
Memorial Award for Best Presentation by  
an ASMR Student Member*  
Tamara Varcoe - *Second Place, Ross  
Wishart Memorial Award for Best  
Presentation by an ASMR Student Member*

### Victoria

Dr James Irving - *Premier's Award for  
Medical Research*  
Jason Gill, Niall Tebbutt and  
Margarite Vale - *Commendations,  
Premier's Award for Medical Research*

### Western Australia

Jim Yu-Hsiang Tiao - *Western  
Australian Department of Health Prize*  
Raelene Lim - *Western Australian  
Department of Health Prize*  
Niamh Keane - *Western Australian  
Department of Health Prize*  
Janelle Pelham - *University of Western  
Australia, Department of Surgery Prize*  
Kirk Yip - *Verigen Prize*  
Tony Phan - *Tri-Med Distributors Prize*  
Amy Samuels - *Ozgene Prize*



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## ASMR Directors and Special Liaison Officer 2003

**Dr Mora Clay, President**  
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**Dr Maria Kavallaris**  
**A/Prof Mike McGuckin**

**A/Prof Andrew Sinclair, Pres-Elect**  
**A/Prof Levon Khachigian, Bus. Development**  
**Dr Ricky Johnstone**  
**Dr Alaina Ammit**

**Dr Bronwyn Kingwell, Hon. Sec.**  
**Dr Anthony Armson**  
**Dr Christopher Semsarian**  
**Dr Lisa Butler, Special Liaison Officer**

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