asmr Australian Society for Medical Research newsletter

July 2014

In this issue:

Australian biomedical research at a crossroads

The health and wealth of nations are inextricably linked. Together, they constitute a virtuous cycle that increases longevity and prosperity. A long-lived and healthy population makes better use of their education, which increases productivity and provides more capital for medical research. For this reason, since the end of World War II, advanced nations have used taxes to fund basic and translational biomedical research to ensure that the cycle's wheels are well greased. For citizens of advanced nations, it costs less than 20¢ per day to fund medical research that have increased life expectancy at birth by more than a decade since 1960. That's a good deal.

For over 80 years, medical research in the U.S.A. has been the envy of other nations. In 1930, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) was formed and over the ensuring decades, Congress increased its funding tremendously. Today, over $25 billion is invested in medical research with economic benefits estimated at $2.8 trillion annually[1]. Boston alone receives more than $1.77 billion in NIH grants, or 8 percent of the total, more money than any other city[2].

Having worked as a scientist and entrepreneur in Boston for the past 20 years, it is clear that research dollars can greatly stimulate the economy if the right conditions exist. Boston has the rare combination of scientific, legal, and entrepreneurial expertise, supported by favorable state and federal policies. In this one city, with a population half that of Sydney, there are 900 biotechnology companies employing 56,000 people with 1,200 drugs in trials. Startup space is abundant, venture capitalists and angel investors mingle with scientists, and anchor pharmaceutical companies train executives who leave and start new ones.

Other cities are trying to emulate this model. In New York, partnerships between government, philanthropies and institutions will invest hundreds of millions of dollars to create new entities such as the New York Genome Center. In Houston, Texas, the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center launched 10-year "Moon Shots" campaign in late 2012, aiming to invest $3 billion to attain ambitious goals in the prevention, detection, and treatment of various cancer types.

Professor David Sinclair — ASMR Medallist 2014

The U.S.A. is clearly losing its dominance. The recent wars and economic decline of the U.S.A are exacting a severe toll. The National Institutes of Health has seen a 30 percent reduction in purchasing power since 2004, with 67 percent of U.S. scientists receiving less funding than they did in 2010. The average age a scientist receives their first research grant is 42, and many are leaving the profession in frustration. In a recent survey of U.S. scientists, 85 percent of respondents believe a reduced federal investment has allowed global competitors to catch up to and even pass the U.S. in scientific research[3]. A surprising 18% are considering moving to another country.

As one of the few Western countries that avoided a severe recession this century, Australia is in a unique position to attract, maintain, and build up its scientific and entrepreneurial muscle that would have a lasting impact on the nation's wealth. It would be an economy based on talent, not minerals.

Australia's politicians seem to agree. On May 14th 2014, the tentative Australian budget contained a provision that would essentially double the medical research budget by imposing a payment every time someone visits the doctor. Though the system is criticized for placing a burden on the elderly, it is the *quid pro quo* of Medicare, a system whereby young people (who can least afford it) contribute to the medical bills of previous generations. Ethics aside, depending on how the money is spent and whether the discoveries are maximized economically, future

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generations may judge this announcement as one of the most significant in the nation's history.

It is hard to deny that millions of people in Australia and around the world will one day benefit from the medical breakthroughs resulting from the increased funding. But with opportunity comes responsibility. How much impact the additional funding will have will depend on the decisions we make now about how the money is allocated, whether discoveries are maximized economically, and whether there is a future finding cliff similar to what happened in the U.S.A. We must learn from recent history about what works and what does not. Fact-based decisions will be essential to whether Australia gets a moderate boost to its economy and world standing or whether it will launch Australia into a virtuous cycle that fuels a golden age of discovery and innovation.

Dr. Sinclair is a Professor in the Department of Genetics at Harvard Medical School and a Professor in Pharmacology at the University of New South Wales. He co-founded Sirtris Pharmaceuticals, Genocea Biosciences, Cohbar, MetroBiotech and BigDataBio.

Footnotes

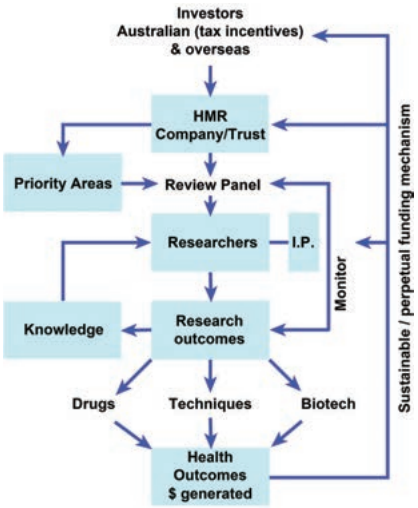
1. Murphy, K and Topel, R. *Measuring the Gains from Medical Research*. (2000) University of Chicago Press.
2. *http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2014/04/01/nih-have-nots-targeting-funds-that-flow-boston-and-other-research-hubs-political-rivalry/6PMxWm8kUCnVWL8Hit6d3M/story.html*
3. ASBMB, along with 15 other science organizations, conducted a nationwide, online survey during June and July of 2013 to measure the effects of the faltering federal investment on scientists and the research they are trying to conduct.

President's Report

Dr Roger Yazbek, ASMR President

This year's Federal Budget saw the Government announce what is arguably the greatest change in health and medical research funding since the establishment of the medical research endowment fund. When the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) reaches full maturity, it is anticipated to return $1 billion, which will be invested back into Australian health and medical research. The new funding model represents Government's acknowledgement of the health and economic returns born from Australian R&D.

We await further details of the MRFF, such as how it will be administered, what will be the priorities of the fund, and what will be the shape of legislation that protects the fund in perpetuity. Government has already begun its consultation process to determine the best strategy to manage and distribute the new funding. I have been fortunate to have had initial conservations with both, the health minister's and the prime minister's office, and will seek further meetings in the near future.



ASMR proposal for an investor-driven, value added Australian HMR funding model

The ASMR has long advocated for investment into the National Health and Medical Research Council to represent 3% of the total health portfolio expenditure. In ASMRs 2011 submission to the McKeon review, we presented an investor driven, perpetual funding model that would ultimately leverage additional investment into Australian health and medical research. In contrast to the MRFF, which is funded in part by the $7 GP co-payment, the ASMR model is an opt-in, investor driven fund. The ASMR holds several concerns about the GP co-payment being applied to the most vulnerable in our community, and we will continue to urge Government to reconsider the available options for establishing the MRFF.

During ASMR Medical Research Week® 2014, I had the privilege of travelling around the country with the ASMR Medallist, Professor David Sinclair, who gave a unique perspective on the future of science in Australia, as well as an overview of his ground-breaking research into the molecular mechanisms of ageing and age related diseases. Professor Sinclair presented to gala dinners around the country, and it was great to see the energy and buzz at each dinner, with Federal and State Ministers from all sides of politics engaging with researchers over dinner conversation. In addition to his gala dinner presentations, Professor Sinclair also spoke to groups of high school students, and it was great to see the student interest in Professor Sinclair's work and pursuing careers in science.

This year's program of events during ASMR Medical Research Week® was outstanding, with record attendances at community outreach and scientific professional development events 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 and dedication to make these events happen. 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 Medical Research Week®.

The Australian Health and Medical Research Congress (AHMRC) will be held in November this year. I am excited about the cutting edge program that has been assembled, including the Transdisciplinary Incubator, which will explore how researchers can build a transdisciplinary research program, the student breakfast, a unique opportunity for students to network with international research leaders. Full details are on the AHMRC website www.ahmrcongress.org.au, and I look forward to seeing you there!

Dr Roger Yazbek, ASMR President

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AHMRC 2014 — Transdisciplinary Approaches to Chronic Diseases

Planning for the 7th Australian Health and Medical Research Congress is well underway with a superb line up of International and National Speakers confirmed. The theme of *Transdisciplinary Approaches to Chronic Diseases* will showcase some of the best examples of 'team science' or research efforts by a group of investigators from diverse disciplines that have come together to solve a problem using innovative methodologies. Besides the plenary sessions, symposiums and free communication sessions there will also be professional development workshops, a student breakfast, a transdisciplinary incubator, poster sessions and for the first time a Congress dinner where all delegates will come together for a great evening of food and drink and the opportunity to network with colleagues within and across disciplinary boundaries.

Congress will open on the Sunday afternoon, 16th November, with the Opening Forum consisting of a panel discussion with internationally renowned experts in transdisciplinary research. From Monday to Wednesday, 17 to 19th November, symposium sessions will cover the use of "omics" and bioinformatics in trandisciplinary research as well as innovations in this area and the epidemiology of chronic diseases. Other sessions range from nanoparticles to photobiology and sleep and mental health. An extensive range of chronic diseases will be featured including cancer, pancreatitis, heart disease, metabolic disease, mental health, infectious diseases to mention a few. On the 17th November there will be an Indigenous Health Forum Event that will be open to the public. The Professional Development Sessions will be run by a leading practitioner and researcher in cognitive behavioural coaching with the following topics covered: 'The Strategic Researcher' and 'Cognitive Behavioural Coaching for High Performers'.

Visit ***www.ahmrcongress.org.au*** for up to date information about the program and speakers and follow us on *Twitter* ***@AHMRC2014***. Early bird registration and oral abstracts close on the 8th of August with poster abstracts due the 12th September. I look forward to seeing you all in Melbourne and thank Associate Professor Gilda Tachedjian, the Program Convenor, for putting together an outstanding program together with representatives from the Participating Societies.

Tina Bianco-Miotto
AHMRC 2014 Convenor

Transdisciplinary Approaches to Driving Health Innovation at IBM Research

Dr Priscilla Rogers,
IBM Australia

Innovation is core to everything we do at IBM Research. We constantly challenge ourselves to push the boundaries of science and technology to make the world work better, whether this is in healthcare, or any other fields we work in.

My passion is driving invention and technology innovation, specifically targeting the healthcare, life sciences and pharmaceutical industries. In my role, I see how the intersection of information technology with medicine can give birth to innovative solutions that would otherwise be undiscovered if the two fields hadn't merged together.

There is a growing realization that researchers need to be transdisciplinary problem solvers. By this I mean more than just working within an interdisciplinary team, where I have seen researchers often struggle to speak the same language. They need to individually bring a depth and breadth of expertise across disciplines to meet real world needs and address what we call "grand challenges".

One particular grand challenge that IBM Research is currently working on that exemplifies a transdisciplinary approach to health and medical research is in designing a cognitive system that is capable of sifting through the vast number of images that a radiologist may have to review to find the subset of the few most clinically relevant ones. The system integrates clinical patient data from a variety of hospital enterprise systems using sophisticated medical text and image processing, pattern recognition and machine learning techniques, which are all guided by advanced clinical knowledge, to extract meaningful patient summaries. This is a complex problem because it not only requires deep expertise in a range of information technology subjects, but also in radiology, biology, and medicine. The ability to engage with stakeholders is also key.

What is remarkable to see is the journey that each researcher takes, adding depth of core expertise in each of their respective fields and at the same time expanding their breadth of knowledge together to solve the same problem. At IBM Research, we not only think it is important to have a blend of subject matter experts, but also to have individual researchers on a journey that increases their own capabilities. This is especially true in health and medical research, where the challenges are increasingly complex. We also see the importance of being embedded in the healthcare ecosystem, engaging and collaborating with clinicians, medical researchers, commercial researchers and other key stakeholders.

I am really excited to be a part of inventing next generation technologies, which will impact the healthcare sector.

Health and Medical Research in Australia — the Labor Party Perspective

Catherine King MP
Shadow Minister for Health

If health and medical research is to be both sustainable and flourish in Australia, then the system as a whole needs to be properly planned and resourced. That is why the Australian Labor Party commissioned Simon McKeon to comprehensively review health and medical research in Australia.

The McKeon Review identified that health and medical research needs to be embedded in Australia's health system. This is in stark contrast to the Abbott Government's proposed Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) which will only succeed if other parts of the health system fail. Most concerning is that the MRFF seeks to find the cures of tomorrow by imposing a tax on the patients of today. The government should find a fair and honest way to back research, one that doesn't undermine preventive health care and one that doesn't sacrifice Medicare.

Labor is equally concerned that there is no guarantee that the current pool of NHMRC funds will be protected over time. Indeed the Abbott Government has been unable to provide meaningful detail on how the fund will operate. In June Department of Health officials confirmed they had no input into

designing the MRFF. Nor were the NHMRC, Australia's Chief Scientist, or experts in the field consulted. Had they been consulted, experts would have also rightly advised that medical research relies other scientific disciplines to succeed. Tony Abbott's short-sighted cuts to the ARC and CSIRO will do little to accelerate new discoveries and cures to disease.

The Leader of the Labor Party, Bill Shorten has taken personal responsibility for the science portfolio and has repeated time and time again that he aims to make science and innovation a national priority. He has recognised the need for a long-term sustainable system that is backed by a comprehensive strategy. Health and medical research will be a critical part of this strategy. My consultations with the health and medical research sector confirm that a strong and sound strategy will give job security to our early and mid-career researchers, and provide incentives for collaboration and entrepreneurial activity, not just publication rates. A well-built system will also facilitate clinical trials and attract additional funding sources including philanthropic contributions and investment from superannuation funds.

Over the course of the next two years Labor will be developing its policies to better support health and medical research in Australia. We support long term sustainability of the sector, but we will not be asking Australians to sacrifice universal health care in order to fund medical research — it is a false choice, it's deceitful and it's unfair. My colleagues and I have already met with many ASMR members to discuss the best way this can be achieved and I look forward to continuing this dialogue with you. I also encourage your input into the Senate Inquiry into Australia's Innovation System established by Labor: (*http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/Innovation_System*)

Catherine King MP
Shadow Minister for Health

ASMR Medical Research Week® 2014

What a big week it was in Medical Research! Right across the country, ASMR's Medical Research Week® was celebrated through gala dinners, scientific meetings and networking functions and various public and school outreach events. MRW® is the flagship event of the society that provides researchers with an opportunity to highlight the importance of H&MR directly to politicians, business leaders and the wider public. The week also strives to inspire the young minds that we need for the highly-skilled work force of tomorrow.

A new initiative that was trialed for the first time in several states was our 'Dinner with a Scientist'. Based upon the successful model run in Victoria, this public outreach event fosters communication between scientists and interested members of the public over a casual meal. We hope to now roll this out in all the capital cities across the country and make this a permanent event in MRW.

Peter Dutton MP with Commonwealth Health Minister's Award for Health and Medical Research Winner Dr Justine Gatt

Many researchers will recall that their first scientific presentations were at a local ASMR scientific meeting during MRW. These meetings provide a professional and supportive environment that helps early career researchers to develop their presentation skills. It was great to hear that several states broke their attendance records this year, emphasizing the relevance of these events. Congratulations to all the presenters who received awards.

ASMR Medical Research Week ® would not be possible if it were not for the tireless efforts of all those who volunteered their time to the organising events and bringing the week to life. We also thank our sponsors who support the society so generously. I would also like to extend a debt of gratitude to ASMR Medallist Professor David Sinclair for his contribution at all the gala dinners and for all the media commitments he made himself available for during his grueling trek across the country. Thank you also to Cath and Priscilla who always do a superb job managing the enormous volume of phone calls, emails and invoices that pass through ASMR HQ.

Dr Steven Polyak,
ASMR Medical Research Week® convenor

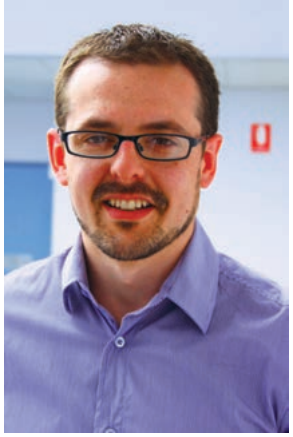
ASMR Medallist Professor David Sinclair with ASMR President Dr Roger Yazbek, Peter Dutton MP and ASMR past President Professor Rob Ramsay

ASMR Director Brigid Lynch with NHMRC CEO Warwick Anderson and ASMR Victorian Committee Convenor Katherine Johnson

ASMR Medallist, Professor David Sinclair, with school students

ASMR President Dr Roger Yazbek with Associate Professor Demelza Ireland at the WA Gala Dinner

More Than Just Scientists



Dr Luke Hesson

As scientists our professions encompass a richness of diverse skills. In addition to being experts within our respective fields we're also expected to be public speakers, professional writers and illustrators. As we progress to senior researchers we must evolve to develop skills in mentoring, teaching, accounting, people managing, even motivational coaches. This makes our scientific careers a journey of enormous personal and intellectual growth. Often this growth is expected with little guidance — just the occasional word of wisdom from our mentors and good old trial and error. But there is a wealth of literature out there to help us develop these skills. In this regular Professional Development section we will recommend a series of *Perspectives Articles*, each with a focus on one of these aspects of professional development. In this Newsletter, we recommend an excellent article describing *"How to build a motivated research group"* by Professor Uri Alon from the Weizmann Institute of Science (*Molecular Cell*, 2010 37:151). This article describes some of the key principles current and future research leaders can embed in their research teams to foster a nurturing environment for students and post docs. These principles enable students to follow a scientific career that is an extension of their own passions, skills set and unique perspective on their field.

At this year's Australian Health and Medical Research Congress (AHMRC) meeting to be held in November in Melbourne the ASMR will be hosting two separate Professional Development events. These events will be facilitated by Maria Gardiner — a leading cognitive behavioural coach and clinical psychologist who has coached many of Australia's medical, academic, industry and government executives over the last fifteen years.

The first Professional Development event, to be held Monday 17th November, is aimed at research teams and team leaders. This exclusive workshop will focus on Strategic Research Planning, with an emphasis on maximising the productivity of your research team and the psychology of high quality, high quantity writing.

The second professional development event will be held on Tuesday 18th November and will focus on Cognitive Behavioural Coaching to maximise the research performance of researchers and research students.Further details can be found on the AHMRC website.

Dr Luke Hesson

Perfect match — finding a career development mentor

Dr Joanne Bowen

ASMR Mentor Program

I have been a member of ASMR since 2006 and actively involved in the South Australian Committee since 2008. In 2011, I transitioned from a full-time research position into a teaching and research position at the University of Adelaide. I knew I needed some help and guidance during this time to balance new responsibilities whilst maintaining research output. I came across the ASMR mentor program and saw that it offered members 5 to 12 years postdoctoral an opportunity to be matched with a Career Development Mentor, and I jumped at the chance.

The first thing I had to do was outline my immediate and long-term goals. I wanted to establish and run my own research laboratory, be successful in obtaining grants that would cover salaries for research staff, finish my fellowship and be promoted to senior lecturer. I also wanted to focus on increasing my independence from my PhD group by setting up new collaborations and industry links, as well as publishing outside of my core area. I was able to search through the profiles of the mentors and be matched with someone who best suited my aspirations.

Once matched, I met with my mentor, Professor Pam Sykes, every few months to discuss a range of issues. In particular, she helped me to focus on areas in my CV that needed to be enhanced, reviewed grant and fellowship application drafts, and introduced new contacts. It was also fantastic to be able to express my fears and frustrations with the profession and receive encouragement and guidance in a confidential manner. With her help, I successfully navigated my way through a challenging period and all of my initial goals have been fulfilled.

I can not speak highly enough of the mentor service provided by ASMR. It is so important for early career researchers to have a person, independent from their existing research group, to be a champion and provide constructive feedback on their approach to their career. This is one of the only formal mentor programs I am aware of and really has made a lasting difference for me.

Dr Joanne Bowen, University of Adelaide

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The Importance of Philanthropy and Planned Giving in Medical Research

One of the great strengths of planned private giving is that it can 'fill in the cracks', channeling money into areas which might otherwise go unexplored because they lie outside the scope of other available funding possibilities. Philanthropy can also allow for sustained dedication to a specific area of study by supporting an appointment within a team, with a defined role that's protected from any external budgetary factors that might arise.

Philanthropy Australia Member James and Diana Ramsay Foundation are an example of this. In 2011, they supplied a three-year grant to the Neurosurgical Research Foundation to facilitate the appointment of a Research Assistant for Paediatric Neurosurgery. The successful candidate, Dr Aye Aye Gyi, brought to the role a strong history of operational, evaluative research, expertise in research design and quantitative data analysis, and a Master of Philosophy in Evidence Based Health Care.

Dr Gyi was appointed in January 2012 and, using her extensive knowledge background, designed a purpose-built database for all neurosurgery patients managed at the Adelaide Women's and Children's Hospital. Within six months Dr Gyi, working under the supervision of Neurosurgeon Dr Amal Abou-Hamden, was able to report on emerging trends in the collated and documented data.

Dr Abou-Hamden was then able to translate these emerging trends into the clinical setting, leading to potentially life-saving treatment developments. Having information about the paediatric neurosurgery patients managed at the hospital housed within a database tailored specifically to the nature of data has improved the understanding of conditions, improved quality of life, and allowed for greater knowledge sharing across centres in South Australia and worldwide.

One of the conditions of the philanthropically funded research position was that the findings which resulted from the database were to be disseminated to all paediatric neurosurgeons throughout Australia. This highlights another of the absolutely vital roles that philanthropy can play in medical research, which is that of the pursuit and sharing of knowledge without having to account for vested interests from within the corporate sphere.

Photo courtesy of James and Diana Ramsay Foundation

The James and Diana Ramsay Foundation is most well-known in South Australia — and throughout the country — for its generous and extensive support of the arts, but also has strong connections to the advancement of the medical field and for youth at risk. Sir John Ramsay was one of the original founders of the Royal Australiasian College of Surgeons and his son, James Ramsay AO, donated $60,000 to the College for its 60th anniversary, which was used to establish the Fellowship for Provincial Surgeons. James died in 1996; and his wife, Diana Ramsay AO established the James and Diana Ramsay Foundation in 2009 and the Foundation continues to support these three main focus areas, with applications currently by invitation only.

For more information about the benefits of philanthropy, please visit ***www.philanthropy.org.au***

About Philanthropy Australia

Philanthropy Australia is the national peak body for philanthropy and is a not-for-profit membership organisation. Our members are trusts and foundations, businesses, families and individuals who want to make a difference through their own philanthropy and to encourage others with their giving. As the national peak body we offer representation, networking, services and information to members and others in the not-for-profit sector, carrying out our mission to represent, grow and inspire an effective and robust philanthropic sector in the community.

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