Menzies Research Institute

Bulletin 55

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Unravelling the puzzle of MS

Kyla Mathers woke up one morning with dreadfully numb feet. As the day progressed, the numbness slowly moved up her body in waves to under her chest.

Six weeks later, Kyla lost all sensation in her right arm.

Then, she became temporarily blind.

Kyla was told she had multiple sclerosis.

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic degenerative and unpredictable condition that randomly attacks the brain, spinal cord and nerves of the central nervous system. Common symptoms of MS include the inability to control functions such as vision, walking and talking.

Research has demonstrated that it is likely that immune response, genetic predisposition and environmental factors, such as a virus or infection, may all contribute to the disease.

MS is the most common neurological disease affecting young Australians today. Three out of four people diagnosed with MS are under the age of 35. More women than men develop MS, approximately a 2:1 ratio.

Sadly, over 1,000 young Australians will be diagnosed with MS this year. Their families, friends and carers will share the associated emotional, financial and physical burden.

What's inside

Kyla Mathers with Dana, Nikki and Jack on their verandah

Kyla's eldest daughter, Nikki is 16 years old. Nikki is the main carer in the Mather's household. Daily, Nikki assesses her mum to make sure nothing 'bad' is about to happen.

Nikki says that sometimes it's just a matter of saying to her mum: "Right, you get to bed!"

The overall cause of MS is still unknown and there is currently no cure for the disease. The Menzies Research Institute is helping to unravel this mystery disease and finding ways to improve the lives of those living with MS.

Menzies' researcher Associate Professor Bruce Taylor is currently researching *Factors that predict the rate of progression following a first episode of multiple sclerosis.*

Associate Professor Taylor says that knowing who will progress to develop multiple sclerosis after a first attack and at what rate they will progress is an important question.

"This will allow us to target treatment to those at greatest risk and modify a person's lifestyle, to reduce the risk of developing MS or slow their rate of progression," Associate Professor Taylor said.

At Menzies, researchers are also looking at the link between vitamin D exposure and MS. Research by Dr Ingrid van der Mei found there is a high prevalence of vitamin D insufficiency amongst a population-based sample of people with MS in Tasmania.

Thankfully, today Kyla leads a fairly normal lifestyle, though fatigue is a daily issue.

Kyla believes she "got the good one". Her rationale behind this is that although MS is an extremely life altering illness, it is not normally life threatening.

"One day I might be in a wheelchair, but hey I will still be here," Kyla said.

For further information on MS and the services provided to people living with MS, please contact the MS Society of Tasmania Information Line on 1800 676 721.

We would like to thank the generous funding bodies who support our research into MS in Tasmania, including the MS Society of Tasmania, the Royal Hobart Hospital Research Foundation, MS Research Australia, the National Health & Medical Research Council and the National MS Society USA.

A night with Sir Gus

The Menzies Research Institute co-hosted the Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) - Medical Research Week® Dinner for 2008.

The Tasmanian Branch of ASMR and staff at Menzies invited guests to enjoy the fellowship of the medical research community at the annual gala dinner on Thursday 29 May, held at the Cascades Visitors Centre.

The keynote speaker for the night was touring ASMR 2008 medallist and world-renowned immunologist Professor Sir Gustav Nossal, AC CBE.

Sir Gus, as he is commonly known, helped build the foundations of modern immunology - an exacting field of science that he helped define for more than 30 years. To acknowledge his achievements in the fields of science and the community, he was named Australian of the Year in 2000.

It was a fantastic night had by all. Supporters of Menzies enjoyed the opportunity to meet our researchers, listen to the delightful sounds of the Davey Street Quartet and celebrate the wide diversity and exceptional quality of medical research being undertaken here in Tasmania.

Sir Gus was inspirational and entertaining in his speech. He has inspired audiences around the world. Sir Gus is considered one of Australia's greatest scientists, thinkers and community leaders.

On the night, he became a motivator to our future generation of scientists, our students, as he presented the awards to the four finalists of The Tasmanian ASMR - Medical Research Week® Student Awards.

The winner of the Medical Research Student Awards was Catherine Blizzard. And the three runners-up were Helen Cameron-Tucker, Cassandra Saunders and Costan Magnussen.

These student awards, which are sponsored by the University of Tasmania Population and Health Theme, recognise outstanding contributions to medical research by Tasmanian research students. Furthermore, the awards provide an ideal opportunity for students to share their research results with the medical research community.

Sir Gus and ASMR student award winner Catherine Blizzard

Catherine Blizzard, Helen Cameron-Tucker, Cassandra Saunders, Dr Tracey Dickson and Costan Magnussen

Researcher profile: Associate Professor Greg Woods

What is the current focus of your research?

I have multiple projects and these include: (1) The role of vitamin D in the development of our immune system; (2) The effect of UVB radiation on the developing skin immune system and why sunburn as a child increases the risk of melanoma; (3) Analysing proteins in the developing skin that may have important roles in development and immune suppression; and (4) Determining why Tasmanian devils are susceptible to devil facial tumour disease and how to prevent the spread of this deadly disease.

What are some of the recent findings from your work?

(1) That males and females respond differently to vitamin D and this may account for a difference in disease susceptibility of males and females.

(2) If the developing skin is exposed to excess sunlight the development is altered and this results in a reduced immune response which is still reduced, even in adult life.

(3) The discovery that it is possible to induce an immune response in certain devils against Devil Facial Tumour Disease and that this immune response is protective.

What is the biggest challenge in your area of research?

Without doubt the biggest challenge is Devil Facial Tumour Disease and developing immunological strategies to protect this iconic species in the wild. We are working hard on this problem and are beginning to obtain some encouraging results.

The other big challenges are determining what is special about the developing skin immune system and how exposure to UVB radiation in early life can influence the immune response and disease in adult life. Unravelling the complex role of vitamin D in the immune response and how it can protect against some cancer, but also regulate the immune response, is also another major challenge.

Why did you become involved with the Tasmania Devil Research Project?

Collaboration with Dr Menna Jones stimulated my interest in the immune response of Tasmanian devils. This collaboration commenced when it became apparent that Devil Facial Tumour Disease was a major problem and, due to my interest in the immune response and cancer, directing some of my attention to this disease was a natural extension of my work.

Associate Professor Greg Woods

As an immunologist, this disease represented a totally new phenomenon and being able to use my immunological knowledge and laboratory to help save this species was a unique opportunity. I feel highly privileged to be working on such an important problem that is unique to Tasmania, but has international significance. Some of the knowledge gained could also have implications for human cancer.

What do you enjoy doing away from the research lab?

We are fortunate to live in Tasmania, as there are so many bushwalking opportunities and I often walk in our fresh clean environment while enjoying the scenery, clearing my head and getting some important exercise.

Meeting of great minds

What do Menzies' Board Director Jonathan West, Deputy Director Alison Venn and Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) student Georgie Boon talk about when they catch up over coffee? The PM 2020 summit they attended in April.

Only 17 Tasmanians were selected to go to Canberra to take part in the celebrity-packed summit that took place on 19 and 20 April.

Staff at Menzies were extremely proud when they found out that three of those chosen from Tasmania were significantly linked to Menzies.

Alison Venn, Georgie Boon and Jonathan West catching up for coffee in Salamanca.

The summit was divided into ten categories looking at Australia in the future. The representatives were invited to represent their field of expertise.

Professor West participated in the summit area *The Productivity Agenda* (education, skills, training, science and innovation); Associate Professor Venn represented *A long-term national health strategy*; and Georgie Boon contributed to *Population, sustainability, climate change and water.*

Professor West proposed four initiatives to 'tilt the economic playing field' in favour of innovation— two with the aim to increase the flow of capital to innovation and two to increase the flow of knowledge.

Associate Professor Venn's main interest was in disease prevention; the need to better integrate healthy lifestyle messages around smoking, nutrition, alcohol and physical activity; and the potential for workplaces to be a key setting for health promotion programs.

Associate Professor Venn says her best memory from the summit was the experience of being with such a diverse and interesting group of people from all around Australia.

"All of them very were committed and passionate about their respective interests and visions," Associate Professor Venn said.

Georgie Boon was involved in the sub-stream of Population and Cities and was the only representative for Tasmania in this area. One of her ideas for the summit focused around the community.

"From my observation it is trendy to be 'Green'. People are changing their light globes and recycling to help the environment," Georgie said.

"However there are many more cheap and easy ways available to continue this current attitude and I believe that an education campaign outlining these simple implementations is needed."

Georgie says the summit was an amazing experience, very draining but incredibly insightful.

Menzies' young achievers

Two of Menzies' top young performing stars were selected as category finalists for the 2008 Tasmanian Young Achiever Awards in February.

Menzies' postdoctoral junior research fellow Adele Woodhouse and junior research fellow Costan Magnussen were selected as category finalists in the TEMCO Science and Technology Award. There were a total of eight categories in the Awards.

PhD student, Heather McGee was also selected as a semi finalist in the Science and Technology category.

Judging for the 2008 Tasmanian Young Achiever Awards announced 28 finalists in total, from a strong field of nominees. From the three category finalists, one category winner is selected as the category award winner.

Adele's PhD was completed under the supervision of Professor James Vickers and Dr Tracey Dickson and focused on *the cellular alterations that occur in Alzheimer's disease (AD)*. Her PhD culminated into three first author papers regarding the role of apoptosis in AD and comparing the pathology present in two lines of transgenic AD mice with the pathology present in human AD.

In addition, Adele published two first author review papers during her PhD candidature. Ongoing research includes comparing the pathology present in early and late sporadic AD cases with familial AD cases.

Costan is a final year PhD student at Menzies. His research focuses on *the development of methods that will help to identify children and adolescents who are at high long-term risk of developing cardiovascular disease.*

His thesis makes use of pooled data from an international collaboration between Menzies and researchers from the Cardiovascular Risk in Young Finns Study, and Bogalusa Heart Study.

The first paper from this collaboration was recently published in *Circulation*, and was preceded by an editorial which emphasised the importance of the paper. *Circulation*, an American Heart Association Journal is the highest ranking journal worldwide, in the cardiovascular disease field.

Adele Woodhouse receiving her award on the night

Since completing Honours, Heather McGee has continued to work in immunology, and has been studying towards a PhD. Heather's project involves *trying to unravel the relationship between exposure to sunlight, which contains ultraviolet radiation, during the childhood period, and diseases such as skin cancer and autoimmune disease in adult life.*

Congratulations to Adele, Costan and Heather for their selections in the TEMCO Science and Technology category. No doubt, this will not be the last we hear of our young stars and their achievements.

Co-location project update

The first tangible signs of the new Co-location building (Stage One) are now evident to passers-by.

Although there doesn't appear to be much change visible, a lot of work has taken place under the ground to construct footings to support the new building.

The majority of footings are 900mm diameter holes bored approximately 10 meters into the ground. Over half of these 37 bored piers have been completed.

Hollydene House shortly after the 1909 additions had been completed

Some of the long coils of steel reinforcing, that go into the bored pier holes, can be seen laying on the ground. Other strip footings and retaining walls have also been constructed.

So far, approximately 600 tonnes of concrete has been poured.

The two lift shaft bases have been constructed, with the main lift shaft seen in the foreground of the adjacent photo. Each of these lift bases contains approximately three tonnes of reinforcing steel and 50 tonnes of concrete, as they will act as anchors for the building.

Laying a solid foundation

Construction of the concrete wall panels has commenced off site. The first ones will be for the lift shafts and the panels will begin to be brought to site and erected over the next few weeks.

Hollydene House

The Project Office is also currently busy coordinating the commencement of design for Stage Two of the Co-location project, the redevelopment of Hollydene House.

The oldest part of Hollydene dates back to the mid 1820s. For 85 years Hollydene was home to some of Hobart's leading merchants. Over the years additions have been made to the building, changing its external appearance. It has had a variety of uses, including a family home, a boarding house and student hostel.

A conservation management plan has been developed for Hollydene House which has been agreed to by the Tasmanian Heritage Council and Hobart City Council, as part of the overall planning process. Hollydene House will **not** be demolished. However, shortly some of the less appropriate 20th Century additions will be removed. The removal of these additions will reveal the 1826 façade.

Later, the front part of the historic 1826 house will be uncovered and a front garden and picket fence will be re-established. In the longer term, the project team will consider how to best reinstate a verandah on the front.

Hollydene House today

The overall aim is to align the building to its 1909 appearance.

The historic building will become an integral part of the new facilities in the future. Hollydene House is set to have a new life as the centre of medical student activity for the University of Tasmania, in Hobart. It will provide a range of student facilities including individual and group study areas and other amenities. It will be linked to the main building by an atrium which will also serve as an undercover café and social area.

Stay tuned for the next edition of the Bulletin, where we will uncover the interior design of the new Co-location building, including selected internal finishes for all five floors of the building.

Cancer research awards 2008

Cancer research grant winners 2008 - Phillippa Oakford (on behalf of Adele Holloway), Greg Woods, Jo Dickinson, Ian Frazer (guest speaker) and Flora Cheong

Earlier this year, world-renowned cancer researcher and former Australian of the Year, Professor Ian Frazer, presented the Tasmanian cancer research awards on behalf of The Cancer Council Tasmania and the David Collins Leukaemia Foundation.

Each year The Cancer Council Tasmania allocates funds received from public donations towards significant research currently being taken within the state, via a peer assessed grant program.

Menzies stole the limelight at the Award ceremony with the following researchers receiving significant research awards for their cancer research projects:

Dr Jo Dickinson, The Cancer Council Tasmania Research Fellow:

Elucidation of the role of a novel susceptibility gene in prostate cancer, $25,000;

The Cancer Council Tasmania Research Fellow, $115,000; and

Investigating the genetics of familial haematological cancers in Tasmania, $25,000.

Associate Professor Greg Woods, Member and Principal Research Fellow:

The effect of UV radiation and vitamin D deficiency on the development of the skin immune system, $50,000.

Dr Adele Holloway, Member and Senior Research Fellow:

Characterising aberrant RUNX1 transcriptional complexes, $20,000.

Menzies' student, Flora Cheong, received notable recognition for her work and was successfully awarded The Cancer Council Tasmania Honours Scholarship: *Vitamin D and the skin immune system, $10,000.*

Thank you to our valued supporters

Many thanks to all of our donors for your ongoing support of Menzies' local research with global significance. Feb 2008 – April 2008.

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research thanks to you

Tasmania's new world class dementia centre

The Wicking Dementia Research and Education Centre (WDREC), an innovative dementia research and education centre for Tasmania, was officially opened by Menzies' Director, Professor Simon Foote on June 10, at the Hobart Function Centre.

This unique centre will benefit all Tasmanians impacted by dementia.

Led by Professor James Vickers and Professor Andrew Robinson, who will be the joint Directors, the WDREC will provide the infrastructure to develop a coordinated and systematic approach to dementia research and education in Tasmania.

The Menzies Research Institute received a $1.5million funding grant from the JO & JR Wicking Trust which is managed by ANZ Trustees, along with an additional $1million funding contributed by the Menzies Research Institute, UTAS (School of Nursing and Midwifery and central funding) and the Department of Health and Human Services (Tasmania), to establish the centre.

This significant $2.5 million initiative will span health and community services, clinical research as well as tackling education and workforce capacity.

Co-Director of the centre, Professor James Vickers, believes that Tasmania is well placed to become a leader in the development of new management and care strategies for dementia.

"The centre will help achieve Menzies' vision of drawing together Australia's leading biomedical researchers, who are focused on determining new therapeutic strategies to treat ageing-related dementias," Professor Vickers said.

In addition, Professor Robinson says the WDREC will have strong collaborative links with other Australian universities and with institutes overseas.

"We are currently facing an urgent need to establish better ways of approaching and dealing with dementia care," he said.

In light of this need, the new centre will have a strong focus on training new graduates, including specialist training and an ambitious program of dementia-based graduate research.

Going that extra mile

Susan Sussems from Menzies receives the cheque from Co-Heads of School, Jack Penny and Abby Pang

On 17 April, 70 Year 12 students from Launceston Church Grammar School took part in the School's traditional 24 hour walkathon. Walking 80km from Selbourne in the state's north to the school's senior campus in Mowbray, the students raised a total of $15,000 with proceeds shared between the Menzies Research Institute and Fred Hollows Foundation.

"This is a rite of passage that is very important to the school's culture," commented walkathon coordinator Art Shrimpton. "The students form real bonds after going through this. It can cement friendships for life."

Community support from organisations such as Launceston Church Grammar School is vital to the success of Menzies' research. Proceeds from fundraising activity provides much needed funding for Menzies' research projects, in particular seed funding that is needed to get new projects underway.

If you, your club or your school would like more information on fundraising for Menzies, please call Development Officer, Susan Sussems on 6226 7707.

Fostering fun and friendship

Prostate cancer research at Menzies has been given a $1,000 boost, thanks to the hard work and community spirit of one of Tasmania's leading insurance agencies.

Formed in 2003, with full support of senior management, the RACT Fun Club is a big part of working life for staff at RACT Insurance in Hobart. The philosophy behind the creation of the Club was twofold. It fosters a culture of unity among working colleagues and it gives back to the community through a wide variety of fundraising activities.

The positive outcomes have also been twofold – the RACT Fun Club has become an integral part of life of staff, and local charitable organisations have been the grateful recipients of their fundraising efforts. Over the years, the Club has raised over $15,000.

Long-time Fun Club committee member, Carol Fisher said that "We try to support local charities – we think that a little bit goes a long way for smaller organisations."

RACT fun club committee members Kate Parker, Carol Fisher & Lisa Teh

Fundraising activities include raffles, quiz nights and special days in the office, such as PJ Day.

Although it is a lot of work, Carol is quick to point out that "Everyone just gets in and helps out. We're like a family in that way. We are really lucky that management is so supportive."

rjMEN0315

More than flowers

In memorium (Feb 2008 – April 2008)

We gratefully acknowledge gifts made in honour of:

Mrs Iris Banner
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Family tree

The following donation of a family tree to assist research at Menzies is greatly appreciated:

Mr Michael Watt
Mr Richard Hodgetts
Mr Brian Richardson
Mr Edward John Marmion
Mr Noel Delbridge

Society for the Future

"Remember Menzies Research Institute in Your Will"

Thank you to the five supporters who have joined 'Society for the Future' since January 2008.

If you would like more information about bequest giving, please contact Barbara Zimmerman, Development Coordinator on 6226 7782 or email barbaraz@utas.edu.au

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