Welcome to the Dementia Institute’s first newsletter

Charles Dickens wrote in the first sentence of *The Tale of Two Cities* "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." So it is also at a time when the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has reported dementia as the second leading underlying cause of death in Australia and, in the same week, the Australian Government announced 76 new fellows would be funded to undertake dementia research. It is truly a time of growing concerns but also a time of great promise. This was foreseen by the Australian Government which committed $200 million to boost dementia research in Australia.

With the recent announcement of new dementia research fellowships and the large dementia team grants in August, we have begun laying new foundations in Australia to boost dementia research and develop new treatments and innovative therapies to prevent dementia and find a cure. Australia will make its contribution to the World Dementia Council’s goal to have a cure or new therapy by 2025.

These announcements also signal that The Dementia Institute, hosted by Alzheimer’s Australia, is up and running and in its new location at the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) in Canberra.

The Dementia Institute has recruited staff and we would now like to introduce ourselves and also provide a little more information on the NHMRC-ARC fellowships scheme, which was recently announced by the Minister for Health and the Minister for Education & Training.

We look forward to bringing you more news on a regular basis.

*The Dementia Institute Team*


Meet the new Dementia Institute team of 4

Professor John McCallum, Dr Christopher Pettigrew, Ms Alexia Vlahos, and Ms Kayla Borman.
Professor John McCallum, Director
John has a long track record in research on ageing. It began with undergraduate studies and the 1977 University Medal at University of Queensland, and then Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral degrees at Nuffield College, Oxford University UK. Before moving to The Dementia Institute, John was the Head of the Research Translation Group at the NHMRC. He had previously worked in university management as Deputy Vice Chancellor (Educational Programs) and Director of TAFE at Victoria University Melbourne and Executive Dean of Health at the University of Western Sydney where he received the Campbelltown Council Community Service Award as Campus Provost.

John was awarded a Federation Medal in 2003 ‘for outstanding service as a researcher to ageing and aged care issues’ including the Dubbo Longitudinal Study on Ageing, national policy projects, the Australia-Japan Collaboration in Aged Care, the international Asset and Health Dynamics of the ‘Old’ Old (AHEAD) project and, not related to ageing, the Vietnam Veterans Mortality Study.

John’s international experience includes positions at the Andrus Gerontology Centre at the University of Southern California, Renmin University in Beijing, Nanzan University in Nagoya and the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology in Japan. Earlier he also worked as a National Service Officer in the Pacific Island Regiment and Employment Officer at Bougainville Copper both in PNG and holds a number of military medals.

Dr Christopher Pettigrew, Senior Research Policy Officer
Chris completed a Bachelor of Laws, Bachelor of Science (with Honours in Biotechnology) and Doctorate at the University of Queensland. Prior to commencing his PhD studies on the alternative splicing of breast cancer susceptibility genes, he worked with the Australian Law Reform Commission on their inquiry into the patenting of genetic material in which the NHMRC was also involved. After receiving his PhD Chris worked as a post-doctoral research fellow at University College Cork (Ireland) investigating the role of reactive oxygen species in survival signalling pathways in prostate cancer. Chris moved to Boston (USA) in 2010 working first at the Boston Biomedical Research Institute and then the University of Massachusetts Medical School on skeletal muscle development and fascioscapulohumeral dystrophy (FSHD).

Most recently Chris was editor of “Trends in Molecular Medicine”, a reviews journal published by Cell Press, also contributing to “Trends in Parasitology” and aiding the launch of “Trends in Cancer”. He has also worked extensively in science communication on blogs, podcasts and radio. We are expecting to use all his skills at the Institute.

Alexia Vlahos, Research Network & Communications Officer
Alexia has taken charge of the internal and external communications for the Institute, including increasing the Institute’s profile through a strong media presence, and providing support to the membership network to promote the work being done by all our researchers. More details about the membership network will be provided in the next issue of the newsletter.

Alexia holds a Bachelor of Communications specialising in Journalism and an Advanced Diploma of Languages specialising in Spanish, at the University of Canberra. She won a Scholarship to Chile, South America, to study languages and journalism in 2007 and later worked in Chile at Thomson Reuters as a journalist. Then from 2010 to 2015, Alexia worked for the private and public sector as a communications and media specialist, including the NHMRC, National Disability
Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and Medicines Australia. In 2012, she received the Secretary’s Australia Day Award of Appreciation for making ‘a positive and worthwhile contribution to quality outcomes whilst modelling high standards of behaviour and ethical conduct’. Working from a small Secretariat with a large, widespread membership, Alexia is playing a central role in our team.

Kayla Borman, Executive Assistant & Administration Support Officer
Kayla joins the Institute in November as our Executive Assistant & Administrative Support Officer. Kayla most recently worked with the Australian Business Academy providing business courses, and before that as a legal secretary for Hill & Rummery in Canberra. In small team the Executive Assistant role with be varied and very much part of the team effort.

More information on the Dementia Research Development Fellowships scheme

The NHMRC-ARC fellowship scheme is designed to provide opportunities for postdoctoral researchers to undertake advanced research training in fields relevant to dementia such as health, medical, fundamental sciences, social, economic and cultural studies, either in Australia or overseas. It is a quite bold initiative to boost the dementia research workforce in order to support increased research activity.

The successful recipients of fellowships cover the full dementia spectrum. We will just pick 3 from the 76 as cases to illustrate this. Dr Kristian Kempe at Monash University is seeking to develop molecules that can transport drugs across the blood-brain barrier which can impede the delivery of drugs and diagnostic molecules to the brain. Dr Ashleigh Smith at the University of South Australia is looking at improving the understanding of the relationship between physical activity and good brain health. Ashleigh’s research will help to develop more effective, targeted and sustainable exercise programs to improve the health of older adults with mild cognitive impairment who are at risk of developing dementia. Then our third example, Dr Sandra Garrido at Western Sydney University will investigate whether music can alleviate depression and the personal factors and musical variables that shape emotional response. This research will assist in the development of innovative tools to help people with mild dementia and their carers. And there are another 73 Fellows whose work is just as exciting!

The Institute’s media releases

- 19 October 2015: [76 of Australia’s Best New Research Fellows Receive Funding to Fight Dementia](#)

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