Director’s report

It is hard to believe a year has passed since I had the pleasure to take on this role and work at The University of Notre Dame Australia. While there are always challenges settling in to a new position, the most amazing aspect of the year was learning how much research is actually undertaken here by staff and students. And the pace seems to be accelerating!

For the Institute for Health Research (IHR), much has also evolved. As outlined in our recently released Strategic Plan, the IHR continues to promote and support health-related research through the running of biostatistics workshops, provision of advice on research design and analysis, HDR student supervision, and collaborating with internal and external researchers in grant submissions and undertaking research projects.

Last year, in addition to running statistics workshops on the Fremantle and Sydney Campuses, staff and researchers associated with the IHR directly supervised 34 HDR students, published almost 50 journal articles and applied for grants worth approximately $6 million. We also started working closely with St John of God Health Care to forge stronger links to their clinical research interests. To this end, they now contribute financially to building the biostatistical capability of the IHR and are funding a post-doctoral research fellow in the field of gynae-oncology to work in the IHR and with clinicians at their hospital. We are also delighted to have a well-established research team relocate their NHMRC funded international, multisite clinical trial to Notre Dame and the IHR. The experience and opportunities this brings to all researchers at Notre Dame is invaluable and reflects the commitment of the Executive of our university to increase the research being undertaken by the university. Also of great delight is to see some of our researchers win WA Health FutureHealth Travel Fellowships which are described in more detail in this newsletter.

This year, to help build on these successes, we will be inviting all staff involved in health research to become part of this activity as Affiliated Members of the IHR and to contribute to 2016 being an exciting year for research at Notre Dame.
Winner of a FutureHealth WA First Year Initiative

It is with great delight that we acknowledge one of our HDR students, Jacqueline Francis-Coad, who has won a $5,000 WA Health FutureHealth Travel Fellowship that will enable her to travel to the United Kingdom later this year.

Jacqueline, who is a titled Gerontological Physiotherapist, is a Lecturer in the School of Physiotherapy, Fremantle, and is in the final phase of completing her PhD under the supervision of Associate Professor Anne-Marie Hill (Curtin, Notre Dame) and Professor Christopher Etherton-Beer (UWA). She plans to submit her thesis in August 2016.

Jacqueline has been investigating how falls prevention can be facilitated in residential aged care homes and will use the travel fellowship to take her PhD research findings to the Centre for Innovative Ageing at Swansea University, Wales, where she will undertake some post-doctoral studies with international mentors. She expects this will result in further publications in 2016-2017 and inform a translational research grant that will seek to improve the wellbeing, independence and quality of life for older people, particularly those who are frailer and living with cognitive impairment. Jacqueline’s PhD research has been supported by the Collaborative Research Network (CRN) initiative at Notre Dame and this travel opportunity will enable her to strengthen collaborations and research activity between Wales, the IHR and the School of Physiotherapy in 2016 and beyond.

Winner of a FutureHealth WA First Year Initiative – Mentoring Grant

The Institute for Health Research staff member, Dr Paola Chivers, has won a $10,000 WA Health FutureHealth Travel Fellowship that will enable her to bring Dr Timo Rantalainen across from Deakin University in June 2016. During Dr Rantalainen’s visit he will be supporting the AMPitup Program team with their bone density research which forms part of the Collaborative Research Network (CRN) initiative.

Originally from Finland, Dr Rantalainen is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences at Deakin University. He specialises in estimating lower limb skeletal loading and has developed and published new methodology for analysing peripheral quantitative computer tomography (pQCT) bone density data pertinent to the AMPitup Bone Density project. Dr Rantalainen has more than 40 publications, published 40 peer reviewed scientific articles, 18 as first author, on topics associated with lower limb skeletal loading, neuromuscular function and bone geometry and strength in ageing. He has built a strong working collaboration within Australia and abroad.

During Dr Rantalainen’s visit to Notre Dame’s Fremantle Campus he will work alongside the AMPitup Program Bone Density research team who include Dr Chivers, Dr Fleur McIntyre, Professor Beth Hands, Associate Professor Aris Siatariakas and Dr Sophia Nimphius. He will collaborate in the discussion and fine tuning of a grant application investigating the benefits of targeted exercise on bone health in West Australian youth. He will support the team commence a comparative bone density analysis process using his new pQCT data analysis methodology expertise with a view to publication. Dr Rantalainen’s collaboration with the Notre Dame team will build a formal partnership to the research team through grants and publications, and links to his broader research collaborations.

Dr Rantalainen will also be available to the broader research community when he presents at the Notre Dame research seminar on Friday 17 June 2016. If you are interested in networking opportunities during Dr Rantalainen’s visit please contact Dr Paola Chivers on 9433 0602 or paola.chivers@nd.edu.au.
Statistical workshops in Sydney

As part of a series of statistical workshops run by the IHR in December 2015, Professor Max and Associate Professor Caroline Bulsara and Dr Paola Chivers presented at a two-day workshop at The University of Notre Dame Australia’s Sydney Campus. The three speakers delivered workshops on ‘Introduction to SPSS’, ‘Logistic Regression using SPSS’ and ‘Introduction to NVivo’. When they weren’t running a workshop, the speakers were available to provide one-on-one sessions regarding an individual researcher’s own data and analytical requirements. Demand for the course was high and the feedback extremely positive. Plans are currently underway to run a similar course in Sydney in the last quarter of 2016.

Research snapshot

A selection of recent publications by IHR researchers and students


Become an ‘Affiliated Member’ of the IHR

For many staff at The University of Notre Dame Australia, teaching commitments impact on their ability to undertake research and maintain momentum in their field of interest. Under these conditions sustaining ‘exposure’ as a research academic is hard. To help address this difficulty, the Institute for Health Research (IHR) is offering Notre Dame staff the chance for them and their HDR students to get greater exposure by becoming affiliated with the Institute. In addition to potentially getting priority support from the IHR, you will also become part of the larger research community by being part of all of the research activity passing through the Institute. Further details will become available soon so please watch for our email or look at the IHR website – nd.edu.au/ihr.
Why did you decide to Medicine?
My first degree was pharmacy which I completed at Curtin University after which I worked for a number of years at PMH and Fremantle Hospital. Whilst I really enjoyed pharmacy, I felt it had limited opportunities for career progression. Having worked on the wards as part of our multidisciplinary team for many years I had the desire to be more directly involved in coordinating patients care which becoming a doctor would enable me to do.

Why did you decide to do Honours?
Up until undertaking honours I haven’t been involved directly in any formal research. Medicine is continually changing and with the increasing drive for it to be evidence based I wanted to understand what research actually involves. Another motivation was to develop a better understanding of statistical analysis and why particular statistical tests are chosen. I have found it challenging at times to make sense of findings presented in journal articles so I was hoping to gain a deeper understanding through undertaking my own analysis of my data. Lastly it is exciting to have the opportunity to contribute new knowledge.

Tell us about your project and how it’s going?
Learning to communicate concepts succinctly and clearly is a real art as I know I can be really wordy. I think for me it wasn’t so much about the project but more about the skills I could gain that will hopefully translate to some kind of meaningful research in my career.

Whilst I had some awareness of what research involved, doing the Honours research project gave me a deeper understanding of how very time intensive process it truly is. Even patient recruitment and getting their consent can be very time consuming. It definitely has opened my eyes.

You may be aware that the medical course has changed from a MBBS to a MD which will have a greater research focus. What do you think about that?
I think that it can only be a good thing. With the increasing drive for medicine to be evidence based I think it is important that our future doctors have a solid understanding of research design and analysis. In everyday practice we are consulting guidelines and references that are derived from the latest evidence and it is crucial that students understand how to interpret the evidence and how to apply it to their practice and patient population. However in undertaking a research project I think believe it would be important that students are well supported with experienced supervisors. Navigating a research project can be challenging and I have found advice and help from experienced researchers immensely valuable.

So what do you think is the most important thing you have learnt about yourself through this process?
That I’m not great at time management and hopefully plan to get better! I have a tendency to be a perfectionist and I can agonise over a paragraph for what could be two hours – it’s painful.

What else would you like to add?
Doing the Honours program has opened my eyes to what research really involves. I hope to take what I have learned and carry out meaningful research in the future. If I have the opportunity to publish my findings from my Honours project that would be the icing on the cake, it would be fantastic.

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