An Australian research team led by Flinders University researchers has discovered two new genes that could open the way to new treatments for blinding glaucoma. Their findings were recently published online in the prestigious international science journal, *Nature Genetics*.

The study, funded by the Eye Foundation and the National Heath and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), established that 18 per cent of the population carry risk variants at these two genes, making them up to three times more likely to develop severe glaucoma than those that don’t. Other unknown factors also influence the overall risk for an individual.

The team, headed by Associate Professor Jamie Craig and Research Fellow Dr Kathryn Burdon (pictured) from the Department of Ophthalmology at Flinders University, involved groups from five other Australian universities on the ground-breaking survey of 4500 patients from every state in Australia and New Zealand.

"Although open angle glaucoma is the most common form of the disease, it is poorly understood and difficult to diagnose in its early stages," Associate Professor Craig said.

"Many cases still remain undiagnosed until irreversible loss of vision has occurred," he said.

"Our discovery will help replace routine monitoring and hit-and-miss treatment for glaucoma, by identifying patients at the highest risk of going blind. It opens the pathway to developing completely new ways of treating patients that could delay disease progression and prevent blindness."

Glaucoma is the collective name for eye diseases causing irreversible loss of peripheral vision, often associated with too much pressure developing inside the eyeball. It is the leading cause of irreversible blindness worldwide, affecting an estimated 300,000 people in Australia, of which half are currently undiagnosed.

“This study is the culmination of five years’ work. Before anyone else in the world, our South Australian team achieved these outstanding results,” Associate Professor Craig said.

Dr Burdon said that as part of its ongoing research, the team will examine how these genes relate to other biological measures that are relevant to glaucoma.

"By combining genetics with a better understanding of factors such as the pressure in the eye and how the optic nerve looks, we may be able to develop earlier diagnostics for glaucoma," Dr Burdon said.

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(Adapted from original article in *Flinders News*).
Professor Pam Sykes was recently appointed as a Strategic Professor in Preventive Cancer Biology in the Flinders Centre for Cancer Prevention and Control. Professor Sykes has had a strong association with Flinders University for the last 20 years, maintaining full academic status whilst being employed by the Pathology Service at Flinders Medical Centre.

Professor Sykes leads an internationally competitive research team studying the biological effects of very low doses of ionising radiation, such as X-rays. This research has been largely funded over the last 10 years by the United States Department of Energy Low Dose Radiation Research Program, and more recently by the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia.

Professor Sykes’ group has developed a sensitive mouse assay in order to study chromosomal damage in cells in response to low doses of radiation. This research has enabled the analysis of the effects of doses of radiation that are up to three orders of magnitude lower than other investigators have studied. The importance of this research is that these low doses of radiation are similar to levels experienced in certain occupations and populations. There is a general fear amongst the population that any dose of radiation may increase the risk of cancer, however there is increasing evidence that low doses of radiation may in fact protect from cancer and other diseases. The big question that needs to be answered is “At what dose is radiation protective, and when is it harmful?”. These studies are particularly relevant given the increased radiation exposure during diagnostic medical procedures, the growing use of radiation for security purposes and the recent tragic events in Japan which resulted in radiation leakage from the Fukushima nuclear power plants.

Professor Sykes has developed several international collaborations using this assay, including research partnerships with groups based in Canada, Italy and England. The ability to understand and harness low dose radiation induced protective mechanisms against cancer will enable new approaches for cancer prevention. These studies will form a major component of the research to be carried out in the Flinders Centre for Cancer Prevention and Control within the Flinders Centre for Innovation in Cancer, which also incorporates the LIVESTRONG Cancer Research Centre.

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From the Executive Dean

Welcome to the June Edition of Research Pulse for 2011. The first half of each year is a busy time for our researchers especially with preparing submissions for nationally competitive grants. I wish all applicants from our Faculty success and I thank you for your continuing contributions.

This year researchers with the Faculty of Health Sciences at Flinders University submitted 75 project grant applications to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) as well as 11 to Cancer Council SA, 11 to the Heart Foundation and 8 to Cancer Australia. This is a significant increase on the number of submissions in 2010. Researchers within our Faculty also submitted applications through other NHMRC schemes including Research Fellowships, Centres of Research Excellence, Career Development Fellowships and Translating Research Into Practice (TRiP) Fellowships.

The work of our researchers is supported by many members of the University’s administrative staff and, in this edition, we have included details of the valued support work carried out by some of our staff members.

The Faculty of Health Sciences is again pleased this year to offer substantial funding to our researchers via our internal funding schemes. We are also very pleased to again be joined by the Flinders Medical Centre (FMC) Foundation which provides valuable financial support to many of our researchers. Applications for these schemes closed on 20 May and the outcomes are expected to be announced by the end of June.

I take this opportunity to thank Dr Inge Kowanko who has until recently been co-editor of Research Pulse. Inge has made a great contribution in ensuring the high quality of editions of this newsletter since its inception in 2005. We welcome Ms Pat Barkway from our School of Nursing and Midwifery and Dr Karen Lower from our School of Medicine to the Editorial Team of Research Pulse and look forward to both Pat and Karen hunting out great stories about the wonderful work being carried out by researchers across our Faculty.

Professor Michael Kidd AM Executive Dean Faculty of Health Sciences Flinders University

New Strategic Professorship

Professor Pam Sykes was recently appointed as a Strategic Professor in Preventive Cancer Biology in the Flinders Centre for Cancer Prevention and Control. Professor Sykes has had a strong association with Flinders University for the last 20 years, maintaining full academic status whilst being employed by the Pathology Service at Flinders Medical Centre.

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Professor Pam Sykes
Bowel cancer research boost

An award-winning gastroenterologist from Flinders Medical Centre and Flinders University has received another substantial grant to continue his ground-breaking research into bowel cancer screening.

Professor Graeme Young was recently awarded nearly $1.2 million from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) for his latest research project, ‘Evaluation of blood-based screening tests for colorectal cancer’. His preliminary investigation into colorectal cancer screening methods, which began in 1985, was recognised by the NHMRC as one of Australia’s 10 best studies for 2004.

The early research involved validating a new screening kit technology – now known as a faecal immunochemical test or FIT – which detects invisible blood in a bowel motion and aids in the early detection of bowel cancer in people who do not have any obvious symptoms of the disease. This new technology was implemented across Australia in 2007 by the Federal Government in the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program, which offers home-based bowel cancer tests to Australians turning 50, 55 and 65 years old each year.

Professor Young said a barrier to bowel cancer screening for a proportion of people is the need to sample their bowel motions - however the latest round of funding will assist in developing a new screening test using blood samples. ‘In collaboration with a biotechnical company, we’ll be investigating whether there are any molecules in the blood reflecting the presence of unsuspected bowel cancer or polyps that could be used to develop a blood test for screening,’ he said. ‘I consider that this would help overcome the barriers to screening which are created by the need to sample faeces.’

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(Adapted from original article in Southern Health News).

Vice-Chancellor’s Postdoctoral Research Fellowships

The Flinders University Vice Chancellor’s Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Scheme is a new initiative to build the University’s research and to support outstanding early career researchers seeking to commence an academic/research career.

The scheme focuses on outstanding early career researchers who would normally be within 5 working years since completing their Doctoral qualification. This will be a highly competitive scheme and applicants are expected to have a strong track record relative to opportunity. A start-up grant, to be negotiated, may be provided to successful applicants.

Fellowships are expected to be aligned with the University’s areas of identified research strength, listed with contacts, in the guidelines.

There are 4 Research Fellowships available

Appointments of 3 years full-time research, with possibility for 4 year appointments with a teaching component

Salary (Level A/B): $57 693 to $87 836 pa (full-time)

Plus 17% employer superannuation

Applications close: 11.00 am, Monday, 27 June 2011


Dr Richard Le Leu and Professor Graeme Young
Marine Biotechnology—The sea is our future

Compared to the terrestrial environment, the marine environment is a relatively new area for biodiscovery. South Australia’s marine realm has high levels of biodiversity – with more than a thousand macro-algae species and hundreds of other fish and invertebrate species, and very high levels of endemism (ie. plants and animals only found here). Yet, it remains Australia’s least explored coastline in terms of marine biodiversity and ecology. Its commercial potential in the areas of nutraceuticals (food product that contains health benefits) and other products that offer health and medical benefits is untapped.

Professor Wei Zhang of the newly formed Flinders Centre for Marine Bioprocessing and Bioproducts (FCMB²) invited Professor Joe Baker OBE to present the inaugural Flinders University Marine Biotechnology Seminar to discuss this underexplored area of research. Professor Baker is a former director of Roche Research Institute of Marine Pharmacology and the Australian Institute of Marine Science and one of the founders of marine biotechnology in Australia. He is also a member of the Board of Advisors to FCMB², which is chaired by Mr Barry Murphy. Other members are Professor Rob Lewis Mr Dennis Mutton, Mr Graham Walters and Professor David Day.

The seminar entitled “The Challenge of Realizing the Bioindustries Potential of the Oceans” was presented in February at the Flinders Victoria Square campus. Over sixty guests representing universities, government departments and industry were treated to an inspiring talk that positioned South Australia in the area of marine biodiscovery.

The marine biotechnology seminars will be presented by FCMB² every few months, with the aim of stimulating interest in this area of research at Flinders University.

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Research Links with the Royal District Nursing Service SA

The RDNS Research Unit was established in 1996 and since 2005 has been led by Adjunct Professor Debbie Kralik. The RDNS Research Unit has close links with Flinders University, in particular the School of Nursing and Midwifery having undertaken several research projects collaboratively.

The focus of the RDNS Research Unit is to facilitate research with community health and care clinicians to answer questions raised in practice. The aim is to develop research programs that are responsive to community needs. The outcomes of research have directly changed community health and care practice leading to better health outcomes for the Adelaide community.

RDNS research has focused on varied topics including the experience of comorbid chronic illness (including self care), homelessness, continence, palliative care, dementia, centenarians, child sexual abuse, anaphylaxis, wound healing, mental health and HIV/AIDS.

A major advantage of having a research unit in a health service is that research findings can translate directly into practice often with the enthusiasm of the clinicians themselves. RDNS research findings also link closely with clinical governance and clinical education at times enhancing and challenging traditional care services. In this way research becomes fundamental to clinical practice and a research culture is generated where critical questioning is encouraged.

One example is that injectable medications used in home based palliative care were routinely discarded if drawn up but not used within 24 hours. The RDNS Research Unit was assisted by many other agencies to test the stability and sterility of these medications. An outcome of this research has been a significant change to the way injectable medications are used and stored in home based palliative care and a reduction by seven-fold in the amount of discarded medication.

The products of RDNS research are diverse and include health resources, books for popular press and more than 200 publications (including book chapters) for dissemination of research findings.

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The signalling molecule insulin is integral in controlling the cellular processes required in order for our cells to use the nutrients from food we have consumed. A failure of our cells to respond to insulin, called insulin resistance, can result in Type 2 diabetes. Obesity, a major risk factor for type 2 diabetes, causes considerable fat accumulation in the liver, an organ essential for the proper metabolism of nutrients in food through insulin signalling.

Insensitivity of liver cells to insulin is a major component of the development of type 2 diabetes, however exactly how fat accumulation in the liver leads to insulin resistance is not well understood. A study being carried out by Professor Greg Barritt based in the Flinders Medical Centre, seeks to better understand the mechanisms by which obesity and fatty liver lead to insulin resistance in type 2 diabetes.

One of the ways in which insulin and other hormones work in the liver is by changing the concentration of calcium ions in liver cells, which in turn regulates carbohydrate, fat and protein metabolism. Changes in calcium ion concentration are achieved by altering the activity of proteins in the cell surface which allow calcium in and out of the cell.

Current research, which has recently been awarded a Diabetes Australia Research Trust grant, is being carried out on special rat liver cells which have been induced to take up excess fat (fat-loading). Calcium uptake, and analysis of the proteins regulating this uptake, is then measured in these cells. Results so far have shown that in fat-loaded liver cells, the rate of hormone-induced calcium uptake is inhibited, and this is also associated with a decrease in the amount of specific proteins which allow calcium flow. Future experiments will analyse how these changes may relate to the development of insulin resistance and altered carbohydrate and fat metabolism in fat-loaded liver cells.

It is anticipated that this research will enhance our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development of type 2 diabetes in individuals with obesity, and may potentially provide a rationale for new pharmacological treatments.

The research involves collaborations with Dr. Grigori Rychkov in the Department of Physiology at the University of Adelaide, Dr. Chris Triggle and his team at Weill Cornell Medical College, Qatar, and Ms. Claire Wilson and Professor Greg Barritt in Medical Biochemistry, Flinders Medical Centre.

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How is obesity, fatty liver, and insulin resistance linked to Type 2 diabetes?

Johns Hopkins visiting scholar at Flinders

The School of Nursing and Midwifery (SoNM) is currently hosting a visiting scholar from Johns Hopkins University, School of Nursing, Baltimore in the USA. Associate Professor Dan Sheridan is based at the School through to August this year, having arrived in February to work closely with SoNM staff in the development of an online forensic healthcare course for nurses, physicians and paramedics.

Dan developed specialized forensic nursing courses at the master’s and doctoral levels at Johns Hopkins and also works for the state of Oregon (USA) Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Senior Services Divisions where he serves as a consultant and expert witness for abused and neglected elderly and persons with profound cognitive and physical disabilities.

He is working closely with Flinders Associate Professor Linda Starr in the development of the forensic short course and is participating in public and clinical forums on Elder Abuse with Flinders researchers, primarily in introducing Elder Abuse trends in the USA as well as techniques in documenting violence related injuries using medical forensic terminology.

Dan has also presented to 1st year Forensic and Analytical Chemistry students, to relate some of the approaches used by sexual assault clinicians in the USA to collect samples as forensic evidence.

He has published more than 30 clinical and research articles on nursing’s role in abuse and forensics and has given over 600 invited lectures on these topics nationally and internationally.

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Associate Professor Dan Sheridan
Celebrating Success in the Faculty

The Faculty of Health Sciences congratulates members who have recently received research grants, awards or honours. The following list shows Chief Investigators who received grants from 10/2/11 to 3/5/11, as advised by the Research Services Office.

Leukaemia Foundation
Bryone Kuss, Scott Grist: Improving prognostic assessment of CLL by an analysis of DNA repair, $100,000.

Bryone Kuss, Scott Grist: Identifying patients at high risk of relapse in chronic lymphocytic leukaemia, $25,000.

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
Sharon Lawn: Schizophrenia Awareness Week, $10,000.

Multiple Sclerosis Research Australia

National Rural Health Alliance
Robyn Aitken: RHCE Program CPD training for Aboriginal Health Workers living & working in Remote NT, $73,927.

NHMRC Equipment Grants

Ying Hu: Olympus BX43F Light Microscope and Camera, $15,328.

Rainer Haberberger: Applied Biosystems Upgrade Kit StepOne Plus RT PCR System, $21,945.

Jessica Grieger: Kenwood DS607 Digital Food Scales, $10,810.

SA Health
Lynne Cobiac: Fruit and Veg Tender, $1,094,475.

With the National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) Project Grants submitted on 5 April we would like to acknowledge the team who supported researchers and managed the process on behalf of the University. This small team included Glenda Neild, Faculty Office Research Admin Team and Julie Petticrew and Lee-Ann Thomas, Research Services Office (RSO).

Their role involved responsibility for compliance reviews and ensuring all grants were submitted on time as well as managing the various iterations of applications. They fostered a supportive environment for researchers and spent many hours providing reassurance and assistance. They will continue to provide the executive and management with updates of progress and statistical data.

One of the most rewarding parts of the process for the team is seeing an application develop over the course of a few weeks into a highly polished competitive grant. Seeing grants awarded is even more satisfying for them.

The team are very aware of the challenges faced by researchers applying for NHMRC funding. The NHMRC’s Research Grants Management System (RGMS) was challenging and somewhat frustrating for all users, but fortunately it performed well the last few weeks prior to the final deadline. The other major challenge is the sheer competitiveness of obtaining NHMRC funding, and it is becoming increasingly so.

This year the DVC(R) provided funds to employ Anne Cazneaux from Ophthalmology to assist researchers update their CVs in RGMS, this was incredibly well received and was a valuable contribution which they would like to see continued and expanded. He also provided the opportunity this year for previous ‘Near Miss’ applicants to obtain external review, and there was also external review assistance provided for researchers for whom English was a second language - they received very positive feedback for both these initiatives and hope that they will be offered again in the future.

The Team would like to thank all those applicants who waited patiently for their internal reviews and wish all applicants a successful outcome.
Armed with a $550,000 NHMRC grant, a team of Flinders University researchers will soon begin a study into whether reversing the reflux-related condition Barrett’s oesophagus can prevent cancer.

Professor David Watson, Head of the Department of Surgery and co-Head of the Flinders Centre for Cancer Prevention and Control, has received funding through the National Health and Medical Research Council’s latest round of project grants. The funds will go towards a three-year study to determine whether reversing Barrett’s Oesophagus can stop deadly cancer cells from developing in the oesophagus, a muscular tube leading from the mouth to the stomach.

Barrett’s Oesophagus is caused by the chronic reflux of gastric juices passing back up through the lower oesophagus, which in some people changes the cells lining the area to resemble those of the bowel. In Australia, about one percent of the population, or 200,000 people, suffer from Barrett’s Oesophagus, and, of those, five to 10 percent will eventually develop cancer.

Professor Watson said the prevalence of oesophageal cancer, or, adenocarcinoma, had skyrocketed by up to 600 percent over the past 30 years – the fastest growth rate for any cancer in the western world. It is usually diagnosed at an advanced stage when most people are not able to be cured. However, Professor Watson said the study aimed to find out whether the disease could be successfully prevented by reversing Barrett’s Oesophagus, using a day surgery procedure to return the lining to its original appearance. ‘We know we can destroy the lining and make it look normal again but we don’t know whether it will stop people getting cancer, or if the new lining is stable or unstable,’ he said.

‘The presumption is that if it looks normal it will behave normally, but that might not be the case. So what we will do is take samples from the original lining before treatment, and the new lining once Barrett’s Oesophagus is reversed, and see whether precancerous changes in the cells are reversed.’ He said oesophageal cancer could be prevented if the reversing treatments are effective. The research will be carried out in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne over the next three years, with approximately 10 researchers involved from Flinders.

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(Aadapted from original article in Southern Health News)

Oesophageal cancer under the microscope

Network research in the Riverland to improve mental health services

The towns of the Riverland are the focus of a mental health pilot project for the School of Nursing & Midwifery’s Primary Health Care research team. Led by Professor Jeffrey Fuller with other Flinders researchers, Dr Julie Henderson, Professor Richard Reed and Professor Jennene Greenhill, the research involves working with local health services in order to identify how the local care network operates. A local care network includes organizations and individuals who cooperate together towards a common goal, and this research will address how well the current system works in order to meet the physical health care needs of people with chronic mental illness.

This project will be carried out over 18 months, and will involve interviews with leaders of local health services, combined with a survey of the local health care network, in order to find out which services collaborate around patient care. A review of patients’ health, and importantly their satisfaction with the services they received, will be carried out in 2011 and repeated in 2012, in order to assess any changes.

The research team includes Mikaila Crotty from the School of Nursing & Midwifery and Taylee Healy from the Flinders University Rural Clinical School, with collaboration from the Riverland Division of General Practice, Riverland Community Mental Health Team, Country Health SA, General Practice SA, the University of SA and Sydney University.

Whilst this research is being used as a pilot study, the project aims to improve the quality of local services in the Riverland, as well as assisting in the development of similar case studies across rural South Australia and New South Wales. The results from the Riverland experience will be used to test the rigor and relevance of the action research methodology. With the addition of up to five more case study sites, the team will determine how collaborative mental health care can be carried out effectively for people with chronic mental illness in Australian rural communities.

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Launch of the Flinders University Centre for Point of Care Testing

The newly established Flinders University International Centre for Point-of-Care Testing (POCT) was officially launched on 29 March 2011 by the University’s Vice Chancellor Professor Michael Barber in a function at the Sturt Campus. During the ceremony, Professor Michael Kidd (Executive Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences) spoke on the growth of the Flinders’ Community Point-of-Care Services unit and its evolution to an International Centre. Professor Paul Worley (Dean, School of Medicine) gave a personal perspective on the contribution of the unit and the new Centre to the field of POCT, and Associate Professor Mark Shephard (Director of the International Centre) outlined the research and teaching agenda of the Centre. Professor Jennene Greenhill (Director of the Flinders University Rural Clinical School) was Master of Ceremonies.

Working collaboratively with international partners, the aims of the Centre are (i) to translate the national research and teaching expertise of the Community Point-of-Care Services unit to an international audience and (ii) to build the capacity of rural and remote communities globally, in order to develop and sustain innovative, quality-assured POCT solutions. Achieving these aims will help to improve health service delivery and patient outcomes in remote communities.

In terms of research, the Centre will develop and implement an international POCT model for diabetes management. In rolling out the program, the Centre will partner with universities from across the globe that are socially accountable, and have strong links with their local or regional communities.

For teaching, a postgraduate course will be developed and delivered by the Centre to provide advanced level preparation for practising health professionals from Australian and international backgrounds wishing to specialise in POCT. Particular emphasis will be placed on preparing students for working within a multidisciplinary health care team in remote or Indigenous primary care settings in their country of origin.

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What’s next for problem gamblers?

Trials of electronic card systems that self-limit the time and money a gambler can spend on pokie machines have shown some promising preliminary results, but fundamental issues would need to be resolved before they could be introduced, according to the director of the Flinders Centre for Gambling Research, Professor Malcolm Battersby.

Professor Battersby chaired a Southgate Policy Club Q&A on Gambling, at Flinders University Victoria Square on Tuesday, March 15. The panel included no-pokies campaigner Senator Nick Xenophon, SA’s Minister for Gambling, the Hon Bernard Finnigan, and Australian Hotels Association (SA) General Manager Mr Ian Horne. Flinders Vice-Chancellor Professor Michael Barber opened the Policy Club discussion. As well as discussing broader aspects around the prevention of gambling problems at a population and public health level, the panel canvassed specific issues such as so-called pre-commitment technology. Professor Battersby said there are basic questions to be answered about the purpose, effectiveness and viability of a card system for gamblers: “Would it be used, for example, as a mandatory consumer protection device, or would it be targeted at problem gamblers? And how would limits be set and regulated?”

The panel also included Ms Sue Pinkerton, a former pokies addict who is now a problem gambling research consultant, researcher Dr Charles Livingstone of Monash University, and Mr Mark Henley, of Uniting Care Wesley Adelaide and member of SA Responsible Gambling Working Party. The Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity at Flinders runs the Southgate Policy Club to address hot topics of interest to academics, policy makers and practitioners in government and not-for-profit sectors.

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(Adapted from original article in Flinders News).