Pushing the boundaries of research

Research fellowships offered by NHMRC are prestigious, highly competitive, sought after awards for high performing mid-career researchers. Recipients of these fellowships are generally in the top 10% of their field and are viewed as ‘pushing the boundaries’ of research. The purpose of NHMRC fellowships is to provide support for outstanding health and medical researchers to undertake research that is of major importance and of significant benefit to Australian health and medical research. The SPHCM is indeed fortunate to have four staff members who have been awarded NHMRC post doctoral research fellowships.

Dr Holly Seale completed her PhD at the University of Sydney in 2008. Her thesis examined the epidemiology of severe cytomegalovirus (CMV) in Australia, with a special focus on congenital CMV and the disease burden in high-risk groups. In April 2008, she was appointed as an Associate Lecturer at SPHCM and was promoted to lecturer within two years. Her role at the SPHCM includes a large program of research, supervision of students, school service and teaching/course development. In 2010, she was appointed to the position of Co-Director for the Public Health Officer Training Program.

Over the last couple of years, Holly’s research has been based around viruses and contagion, vaccine uptake and barriers to immunisation, preventative health behaviours and risk perceptions. This research has focused on a range of different consumer groups including the general public, healthcare workers and general practitioners. She has been a chief investigator on two research grants including awards from the ARC and the NHMRC. In 2010, Holly was the recipient of the School of Public Health and Community Medicine’s Young Investigator of the Year award, and the Public Health Education and Research Trust (PHERT) Immunisation Scholarship, a national award for vaccination research, presented at the 2010 Public Health Association of Australia Immunisation conference.

During the next four years under the fellowship Holly will examine new strategies to increase compliance with infection control measures including vaccines, respirators/masks and hand hygiene amongst healthcare workers.

Dr Mohamud Sheikh is an international public health expert with over 17 years experience in infectious diseases and tropical medicine. He has academic qualifications in Medical Laboratory Sciences (majoring in Medical Microbiology, Virology Parasitology and Medical Entomology), and graduated from University of Sydney with a Master of International Public Health, Master of Health Science (clinical data management and clinical trials), and a doctorate in public health. Thus Mohamud comes with a rich clinical and non-clinical expertise.

He also has various other areas of interest that include public health anthropology, health programs evaluation, qualitative and quantitative data management. Recently, Mohamud has had outstanding achievements and attained several key awards that included; public health education...
Dr Anthony Newall is a lecturer (research) in health economics at SPHCM. He is also an honorary fellow at the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS). He completed his Masters of Public Health (Hons) and PhD at the University of Sydney. His research focus is the epidemiology and economic evaluation of vaccine preventable diseases. He has been involved in research on a number of vaccine preventable diseases, including influenza, pneumococcal, rotavirus, and human papillomavirus (HPV).

Tony has published a series of studies on the disease burden of influenza and the economic evaluation of prevention efforts in Australia. As part of the Multinational Influenza Seasonal Mortality Study (MISMS) he has been a guest researcher at the US National Institute of Health. In 2010, he was awarded a NHMRC Public Health Fellowship. His current research focus is modelling the impact and cost-effectiveness of alternative influenza vaccination strategies in Australia.

Dr Iman Ridda is a NHMRC clinical Research Fellow and immunisation research coordinator/senior research officer at the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance of Vaccine Preventable Diseases.

Iman’s research focus is ageing and infectious diseases, healthy ageing, and qualitative methodology. Her current projects include: prevalence of un-recognised pertussis in people over the age of 40 hospitalized with myocardial infarction and stroke; long term immunity to pneumococcal vaccines in the elderly; and, pertussis in frail elderly.

Student numbers on the rise

The postgraduate coursework program is looking very healthy this year, thanks to the hard work of the postgraduate team and the many staff who have contributed to the teaching and ongoing improvements to the program. At the Census date for Semester 1 our overall enrolments were up 23% on Semester 1, 2010. Since commencing in 2010, the Master of International Public Health has tripled to 109 students, and enrolments in combined degrees (Master of Public Health, Health Management and International Public Health) have doubled since Semester 1 last year. We also continue to attract excellent international students, with a 27% increase since Semester 1 2010.

Many courses have been extensively reviewed and rewritten since last year, in particular Epidemiology and Statistics, International Health, Policy Studies, Indigenous Health and Environmental Health. With the growth of the Health Management program we are pleased to welcome our latest addition to the postgraduate teaching staff, Dr Joanne Travaglia, from the Australian Institute of Health Innovation.

Associate Professor Glenda Lawrence is the new Director of the Public Health Program. Glenda replaces Professor Mary-Louise McLaws whose efforts in guiding the program over the past two years are being reflected in the increase in student numbers.
Aaron Cashmore, a Public Health Officer Trainee on the New South Wales Public Health Officer Training Program and DrPH student supervised by Professors Bin Jalaludin and Lisa Jackson Pulver, has been awarded the Prime Minister’s Australia Asia Endeavour Award.

Aaron is one of twenty Australian postgraduate research students to receive the award in 2011. As part of his award, Aaron will travel to Thailand in September to conduct a study exploring the social and emotional wellbeing of Burmese refugees living in Mae Hong Son province. The study is a 12 month collaborative project involving the New South Wales Department of Health, the School of Public Health and Community Medicine and the Faculty of Nursing, Chiang Mai University.

As part of a team of researchers, Aaron will implement a cross-sectional household survey in one of the four refugee camps established in Mae Hong Son. Aaron says: “The survey instrument will comprise modified versions of two established sets of questions: the Growth and Empowerment Measure (GEM) and the mental health sub-scales of the SF-36. The study aims to assess indicators of empowerment and social and emotional wellbeing in participating adults, identify the factors that are associated with empowerment and wellbeing, and test the validity and reliability of the GEM when used with Burmese refugees in a refugee camp setting.”

The research team plans to share the findings with the participants and the broader community, and work with the community in addressing issues/concerns raised by the study findings.

The New South Wales Public Health Officer Training Program is a respected multidisciplinary specialist public health training program offered by the NSW Department of Health. The Program is delivered through the workplace in partnership with the University of New South Wales through the School of Public Health and Community Medicine and awards a new Professional Doctorate in Applied Public Health.

Aaron has worked on a number of applied research projects during his training, exploring a diverse range of public health issues, including the primary and secondary prevention of tooth decay in children with extensive dental caries, workplace violence among correctional health professionals, syndromic surveillance of pertussis, and the mental health of incarcerated Aboriginal men. Aaron’s award will enable him to continue his research focus on the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged and marginalised populations.

“I feel fortunate and proud to have received this scholarship, and I’m very excited about joining Chiang Mai University, Faculty of Nursing later in the year. I expect the experience will be challenging. The research topic is sensitive and elements of our study design will be hard to implement. Luckily, I am well supported by my academic supervisors, the NSW Public Health Officer Training Program, and the Faculty of Nursing. This will be my second time living and working in Thailand. On a personal level, I hope that by the time I return to Australia, I will be able to speak Thai fluently.”

More information about the Prime Minister’s Australia Asia Endeavour Award can be found on the website of the Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations: http://www.deewr.gov.au/International/EndeavourAwards/PrimeMinistersAsiaAwards/Pages/Overview.aspx
I have always been interested in ‘evidence’. It was during my studies of tropical health that I fell in love with epidemiology as a means of revealing evidence. I had planned to use my new skills in Sri Lanka but war broke out and another opportunity to use my microbiology and epidemiology presented itself, then another, until I found myself on campus at UNSW. In the early 1990s I was thrilled to have an appointment as lecturer at UNSW, a G8 University, and I was thrilled to be promoted to Professor this year at a university that I love.

A lot has changed since entering academia at the end of a period that some academics refer to as the ‘golden’ or ‘traditional’ academic era. Between my appointments as lecturer and as professor I have witnessed significant changes in the intentions of students entering post graduate programs. They pay fees or incur a massive student debt; the competition in the workplace puts the students under pressure to undertake a higher degree principally to become ‘skilled’ or ‘work ready’; and only when they feel secure in these skills are they sufficiently confident to be truly intellectually challenged. The identity and practices of universities have correspondingly changed.

Contemporary universities are seen, by some traditional academics, to have adversely aligned their organisational culture to that of a market-place survival philosophy of maximising student numbers and key performance indicators (KPIs) for its staff. However, the description of traditional academics isn’t flattering either with ‘tribal’ being just one adjective used to describe this culture and ‘resistant’ to the new ideas of what forms ‘knowledge’ as another. When I’m asked if ‘contemporary’ academia is desirable and whether universities have lost their ‘tradition’ I would answer that given our inability to change the funding status quo the question should be reframed - “How do we prosper and fulfil our obligation to the community (to teach, research and serve) in contemporary academia”?

Academics are now required to adapt to the evolving corporate culture of higher education, but this doesn’t mean they are required to alter their ethical framework. Over the years I have learnt what my strengths are as an academic and what skills I needed to adapt and to embrace change. To assist in remaining contemporary it helps me to think of UNSW as a large not-for-profit organisation that must survive in a capricious international market, a market that requires us to become innovative in the methods by which we engage our higher education learners, and a market that requires our research to be used in the teaching and learning process to remain relevant.

To this end I have focused my research and service to my discipline to meets today’s needs while remaining sufficiently innovative to be relevant in the future. I continue to ask myself will my research and service output assist policy and practice and assist in reinvigorate teaching? As an example I focused my earlier research on surveillance of healthcare related infection to incorporate new statistical methods that would provide real-time feedback to clinicians so they could make changes to their clinical practice that would rapidly reduce infection rates. This experience was utilised during my service with the World Health Organization (WHO) as the WHO Advisor to China and Malaysia, where practical solutions for the development of their national infection control accreditation systems were required.

My academic papers into behavioural barriers to hand hygiene in healthcare focused on the practical issues and this experience is being utilised by the
The UNSW School of Public Health and Community Medicine (SPHCM) is happy to announce the appointment of Associate Professor Christopher J Poulos as the founding Hammond Chair of Positive Ageing and Care.

UNSW and HammondCare recently signed an Memorandum of Understanding to establish the Chair of Positive Ageing and Care, supported by funding from HammondCare. The Chair, together with an associated multidisciplinary academic unit, will be located in a newly-completed DOHA-funded Clinical Training Centre in the Hammond Village aged care precinct in SW Sydney. The intent is to develop specialist programs with a broad focus on health maintenance, restoration and care for older Australians, maximising their quality of life at home, and avoiding hospital admissions if at all possible.

Chris Poulos says: “What really excites about me about this position is the opportunity to develop new person-centred models of care. We need to focus on wellness, and on helping people maintain their independence, abilities and quality of life as they get older.”

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Professor Raina MacIntyre, Head of the School of SPHCM says: “Aged Care has been a longstanding focus of SPHCM, and we are delighted to have this opportunity to further build strength in this area, and look forward to working with Associate Professor Poulos and HammondCare to realise this vision. It is an exciting development for SPHCM and UNSW to be able to focus on the important issue of community aged care.”

Professor Peter Smith, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, says: “The University of New South Wales is proud to form this partnership with HammondCare. Under Associate Professor Chris Poulos’s leadership the new unit will enhance teaching and training in this field and develop improved ways to deliver care to older Australians in the community.”

Dr Stephen Judd, CEO of HammondCare, says: “This partnership between UNSW and HammondCare makes the new academic unit ideally placed to develop and provide innovative clinical services to older Australians where they live. This is a win for people; it is also a win for efficiency.”
Dr Graham Roberts Cert H.Ed, DPTH, BHA, MHA, PhD has recently been appointed as senior fellow in the Human Resources for Health (HRH) Knowledge Hub, at the SPHCM. Graham commenced his career in development as a young patrol officer in Papua New Guinea, where he conducted foot patrols to remote areas of the Western Highlands prior to PNG’s independence. That experience led him to return to PNG with the Save the Children Fund (UK) to work in human nutrition in the Southern Highlands, and later, after studying the PG Diploma in Tropical Public Health at the University of Sydney, to work with the PNG Institute of Medical Research on the nutritional status of children under 5 years of age. Graham returned to Australia for further study leading to a Master of Health Administration by Research and eventually to a PhD in the UNSW School of Psychiatry (on national mental health policy).

Graham has been the Australian Team Leader of three AusAID project – two in Fiji and one in PNG. He joined the Fiji School of Medicine (FSMed) in 2003, became its director of research in 2006 and has since been engaged in many research and health service projects in Pacific Island countries. Over recent years Graham established three research centres within FSMed – the Pacific STI and HIV Research Centre (PSHRC) in conjunction with UNSW, the Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Noncommunicable Diseases (C-POND) in conjunction with Deakin University and the Centre for Health Information, Policy and Systems Research collaborating with WHO, AusAID, Equitap, and the Nossal Centre for Global Health. CHIPSJR completed the first ‘in-house’ National Health Accounts in the Pacific Region.

While writing the Health Systems in Transition Report for Fiji, Graham decided to focus his career on the issue of human resources for health on the realisation that a country or region may have all the financial resources it needs but without skills ‘on the ground’ improvements to population health are not achievable.

Graham has a number of published papers, reports and training manuals, and has undertaken many consultancies for international, non-government and donor agencies, especially in the Pacific Island region. He has held a conjoint appointment with the SPHCM, and we now welcome him as a full-time member of staff.

Dr Shanti Raman, MBBS, FRACP, M App Epi was also recently appointed as a senior fellow in the Human Resources for Health (HRH) Knowledge Hub. Dr Raman is a consultant Paediatrician whose research and teaching expertise includes health of migrants and refugees, poverty, international health, child rights and child abuse and neglect.

In her current role as Community Paediatrician in charge of Child Protection services in Sydney South West Area Health Service, Dr Raman has provided clinical leadership and professional development and training in clinical aspects of child abuse and neglect, developed area-wide relevant policies on children’s rights and child protection. She has also set up a number of clinical services for vulnerable populations of children and youth, and is involved in numerous population-based research projects in child health.

Dr Raman has maintained a strong interest in international health and provided consultancy services in international health, particularly related to maternal, neonatal and child health, and has worked on population-based research projects in India.

Dr Raman has been involved with policy development at national and state levels through the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and NSW Health, and at an international level though the International Society for Social Paediatrics and International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. She has also been involved with teaching international health at masters level, particularly maternal, neonatal and child health, and has held a conjoint academic appointment with the SPHCM. We now welcome her as a part-time member of staff.

Dr Husna Razee was recently promoted to lecturer in the SPHCM – a well deserved recognition of her hard work over several years. Husna’s interest and passion is in the area of social and cultural determinants of health particularly mental wellbeing.

Husna says: “My long term career goal is to establish myself as a social determinants researcher
Infectious diseases remain a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide. New infectious agents continue to emerge in animal and human populations as demonstrated by the pandemic of SARS in 2003 and the emergence of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in poultry and humans in 2004/2005. Current patterns of international travel ensure that such infections remain a global threat.

Mathematical models are becoming an increasingly important tool to understand how infections are transmitted within populations and to evaluate the potential impact of control programs in containing their spread and in reducing morbidity and mortality.

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The Aileen Plant Memorial Prize in Infectious Diseases Epidemiology

Professor Aileen Plant was a renowned Australian infectious diseases epidemiologist, whose sudden passing on 27 March 2007 at the age of 58, while working in Jakarta, was an enormous loss to global and Australian public health.

She was a medical epidemiologist, as well as a Professor of International Health at the Curtin University of Technology. She was also considered one of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) leading experts in outbreak investigation. She had extensive experience in outbreak investigation, but her main research interests were in the applied and policy aspects of infectious disease control. She was passionate about her work and travelled extensively, often at great risk to herself, to help people and countries in need of her expertise.

It was her vast experience in the field which prompted WHO to invite her to join an expert investigation team, being assembled in Vietnam, to investigate the outbreak of a deadly virus, later to become known as SARS. Professor Plant and the medical investigation team in Hanoi worked tirelessly to identify the virus, and to develop a method for its control. Once again at great risk to their own personal safety.

In recognition of her work during the SARS epidemic, Professor Plant was awarded the National Medal of Honour, by the Vietnamese Government, for her leadership of the SARS outbreak control program.

Now, to continue to honour her legacy to infectious diseases epidemiology, The University of New South Wales together with the Department of Health and Ageing have created the annual Aileen Plant Memorial Prize in Infectious Diseases. The Prize will be awarded annually for a first author paper, by an Australian researcher, published in the previous calendar year, in a peer-reviewed medical journal in the area of infectious diseases epidemiology.

Applications for the 2011 award close on 1 June 2011. The winner will be announced and the prize will be presented at the annual scientific meeting of the Public Health Association of Australia. The inaugural prize will be awarded at the PHAA conference on 26th-28th September 2011, Brisbane.

Applications must be submitted in electronic form and triplicate hard copy to: Professor Raina MacIntyre, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Samuels 325, Faculty of Medicine, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2052 by 1 June 2011. Electronic copies to: r.macintyre@unsw.edu.au with “Application for Aileen Plant Memorial prize” in the subject line.

“Young Researcher” participation place at the 61st Meeting of Nobel Laureates

Jan Gralton, a PhD student at SPHCM, has been awarded a “Young Researcher” participation place at the 61st Meeting of Nobel Laureates. The 61st Meeting of Nobel Laureates is dedicated to Physiology or Medicine and takes place from June 26th to July 1st, 2011 at Lindau, Germany. Twenty five Nobel Laureates and 570 young researchers from 80 countries will attend this unique forum.

Congratulations Jan on this terrific recognition of your research.