

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS RESEARCH AUSTRALIA

Getting runs on the board with Betty Cuthbert Awards

A cure for MS may be closer than we think. Thanks to the inaugural National Health & Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) Betty Cuthbert Awards two Australian Researchers recently received grants that will help them continue their research into the causes of Multiple Sclerosis (MS).

Announced at a ceremony in Canberra by the Minister for Health and Ageing, Hon Tony Abbott, the recipients of the initial awards are Dr Mark Slee for the Betty Cuthbert Scholarship and Dr Helmut Butzkueven for the Betty Cuthbert Fellowship. Both Dr Slee and Dr Butzkueven are Melbourne – based researchers.

The awards, totalling \$355,000 have been created to strengthen Australia's research into the causes of MS and speed up the discovery of therapies to reduce the debilitating effects of the disease. They also reflect a terrific new partnership between the NH&MRC and MSRA.

Dr Mark Slee works at the Brain Research Institute in Melbourne. He was recognised for his proposal to understand the different responses in human brain tissue in actual patients with various forms of MS.

'This funding will help with the infrastructure and equipment needed for our study which charts the inflammation in the brain of people experiencing MS. The work therefore helps us understand the different activity patterns in different types of MS using a combination of MRI scans and nuclear medicine scans called a PET scan (positron emission tomography),' Dr Slee said. Dr Slee's scholarship is supported by Schering, to celebrate its 75th anniversary in Australia.



Courtesy of Howard Moffat, Auspic

- DR MARK SLEE (LEFT) AND DR HELMUT BUTZKUEVEN (RIGHT) RECEIVE THEIR AWARDS FROM BETTY CUTHBERT.

Dr Butzkueven from the Howard Florey Institute in Melbourne felt honoured to receive the Betty Cuthbert Fellowship award to continue his research into optic neuritis, the most common presenting symptom of MS.

'Our research explores ways in which the brain repairs itself after MS attacks,' explains Dr Butzkueven. 'The project is really about understanding better the body's own repair processes in MS, and finding ways of making it more efficient by utilising and hopefully strengthening these 'natural' repair responses. Its ultimate aim is to develop new treatments for MS, ones that don't work on inflammation but improve and stimulate brain repair.' Dr Butzkueven's scholarship is supported by the Trish Foundation.

Winner of four Olympic gold medals, Betty Cuthbert is known as Australia's 'Golden Girl' of track and field. She contracted MS in 1981. Her strong will and determination demonstrated on the field is now seen in her eagerness to help raise funds for research into this mysterious disease and thus the NH&MRC/MSRA Betty Cuthbert Awards were created.

'This award is to honour a great Australian who has shown remarkable courage not only in her personal battle with Multiple Sclerosis but in her tireless efforts to raise awareness of the disease and the impact it has on the people living with MS. It's hoped that this inaugural scholarship and fellowship will assist researchers to find a cure for MS, which affects approximately 16,000 Australians,' Tony Abbott said.

Courtesy of Howard Moffat, Auspic



- BETTY CUTHBERT WITH THE HON TONY ABBOTT, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGEING, AT THE LAUNCH.

Record year for MS Research funding

A contribution of \$1.263mill. to MS research this year (2005/06) from MS Research Australia and the MS Societies has contributed to a record year for funding. A total of \$5.189mill has been committed from all sources this year, for a range of studies and projects over the next three years. This is more than double the amount of previous years.

The total amount includes significant new grants from the Australian government through the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) and the Australian Research Council (ARC), together with more than \$1million from the USA to our researchers via their National MS Society.

'It is a very impressive figure but more funding is required over an extended period to accelerate results,' said Simon McKeon, Chairman of MS Research Australia.

'Now is an important time to keep up the financial commitment from our generous donors, the government agencies and corporations as Australia seems on the verge of critical research breakthroughs,' he said.



Courtesy of Howard Moffat, Auspic

- SIMON MCKEON.

Breakfast of Champions

Can you feed curiosity? Well the bacon and egg rolls, muesli bars, orange juice and coffee offered to peak-hour commuters at Wynyard Park certainly created loads of interest for the launch of F5m in NSW.

The launch was part of a national awareness campaign and some 4,000 brochures on MS were given away: Something to 'digest' once the food was consumed.

'All the NSW Action Team was there, plus another 40 volunteers,' says Ian Ballard, NSW Action Team Leader for F5m. The number of 'helping hands' was boosted by a celebrity roll up, organised by Ballard through his Foxtel connections.

'Even when told we were starting at 7 in the morning, the celebs all said, 'We'll be there!' I was pleasantly surprised,' says Ballard.

Handing out leaflets and chatting to passers-by were former Australian rugby league captain, Wayne Pearce, James Mathieson from Australian Idol & Channel [V], Lisa Hemsley and Peter Timms from Max TV, Brendon Moar from the Lifestyle Channel, and Channel 10's Leah McLeod.



▶ A CHAMPION TEAM. WAYNE PEARCE (EX CAPTAIN AUSTRALIAN RUGBY LEAGUE) AND IAN BALLARD (NSW F5M TEAM LEADER).

▶ THE F5M GREEN MACHINE AT THE LAUNCH.



F5m
Foundation 5 Million



▶ MIKE HEMINGWAY F5M MEMBER, IS GIVEN FAMILY SUPPORT FROM HIS FATHER TONY AND BROTHERS TIM AND RICHARD.

While the breakfast publicly 'raised the MS flag', Ballard concedes the F5m campaign will be driven by the MS community around Australia.

The F5m campaign (Foundation 5 Million) is based on the idea that if two and a half thousand people from the MS community each raised \$2,000, then there would be \$5 million available for research. Individuals can feel helpless confronted by the diagnosis of MS, whether it affects themselves, a friend or family member. If all efforts were combined, as a group they can hasten a cure. With at least 16,000 people in Australia having MS, the sum seems 'do-able'.

'There's no limit to what you can do to raise money. Trivia nights, garage sales, concerts in a local hall. You can register through the website www.f5m.org.au or call on 1300 356 467 and we can help with ideas and supply material such as posters and T-shirts.'

There have been some fantastic results early in the campaign – a recent golf day and raffle raised \$20,000 – but Ballard doesn't want to discourage people from doing smaller events as well. The campaign needs a grassroots commitment, not just to achieve its financial goal, but to ensure that the MS community as a whole has a sense of taking control.

'So far there is a F5m Action Team in NSW and Victoria. Our aim is to have one in each state. We need more 'champions' in the other states to start up a team,' says Ballard.

The Wynyard Park breakfast was also a team-building exercise for the NSW group. As Ballard says, 'I've made 12 new friends from this, and that's the most important thing for me.'



▶ DR KATHLEEN CURNOW AND DR SIMON BROADLEY CONVERSING AT MSRA'S GENETICS AND EPIDEMIOLOGY WORKSHOP.



▶ PROF MICHAEL BARNETT (SYDNEY UNIVERSITY) AND PROF IAN DUNCAN (UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN), CHATTING AT THE MSRA STAND DURING THE WORLD CONGRESS.

Labs to Collaborate...

What if all the key players involved in the global, or even local, fight against MS collaborated in a joint effort?

This is a priority task for MS Research Australia (MSRA) and it's on a steady path to being achieved.

At the recent World Congress of Neurology in Sydney in November 2005, specialists in this field came from all over the world and MS was one of the major topics. MSRA took advantage of all this talent in one place and arranged two satellite events – the symposium on MS Genetics (aiming to establish ongoing dialogue for the future direction of the genetics research effort) and then a 'Round Table' workshop to develop a research centre.

In the last edition of 'Next', we announced the establishment of the first virtual research centre – focusing on neurobiology. Now, a second group will be formed following the 'Round Table' meeting. It will be the 'virtual' Research Centre for MS Genetics and Epidemiology, spanning both Australia and New Zealand.

A 'virtual' research centre allows experts to utilise today's state-of-the-art technology and 'convene' via modern communication so that the latest information and data is shared in real time.

It is hoped that the outcome will be projects that establish useable genetic mapping for MS, that will help accelerate the cure or prevention of the disease. An increased understanding of MS will also bring on improved treatments, in fact the new area of pharmacogenomics will develop tailored treatments for individual needs.

'There is a synergy in the discovery of vital new knowledge – discoveries will lead to effective therapies in the future,' said Professor Graeme Stewart, Director, Institute for Immunology & Allergy Research, Westmead Millennium Institute, University of Sydney.

MSRA hopes to encourage the collaboration of all research groups in Australia working on common themes. A national model has been developed for each of these theme-based centres. The idea is that more will be achieved in a cohesive framework.

...with a solid Foundation

The setting-up of these two virtual research centres has been largely due to support from the Macquarie Bank Foundation.

Manager Julie White attended an MSRA function held during the World Congress of Neurobiology and says research is high on the agenda of the Foundation's philanthropic activities.

'Research is the first step to understanding the problems affecting our society, whether it's the prevalence of multiple sclerosis, the causes of homelessness or issues affecting educational achievement. Research gives us the information from which to build solutions. For that reason, the Macquarie Bank Foundation has been pleased to support this MSRA initiative.'



▶ JULIE WHITE, HEAD OF MACQUARIE BANK FOUNDATION.

Prevention possibilities in the spotlight



It will be a demonstration of just how advanced we are in understanding possible indicators for Multiple Sclerosis. A forthcoming conference in Sydney will cover the range of topics in current research from Australia and overseas aimed at expanding debate on management and prevention of MS.

The conference – Prevention Possibilities in Multiple Sclerosis, 29–31 March – will be held at Star City in Sydney. Everyone from clinicians and researchers, to people with MS and their families may be interested in attending the various sessions.

'This is an incredibly important moment for everyone involved in MS in Australia as it broadens the way the community approaches and talks about MS,' said Jeremy Wright.

For researchers and neurologists, MSRA is also running two workshops on the day before the conference begins i.e. Tuesday 28 March. In the morning there will be a workshop on a 'National Clinical Trials Register'. In the afternoon a 'Round Table' on the most up to date Australian MS research.

Visit www.ms06.com.au for the program and to register online.

Get up . . . and go!

It may seem counter-intuitive, but exercise can actually reduce tiredness.

Sitting on a couch is not the best long-term strategy for reducing fatigue.

This was one of the important messages delivered at the Lifestyle and Wellbeing forum* held last November in Sydney for people recently diagnosed with MS.

While the MS Society runs many health sessions devoted to research updates or specific issues, this recent forum was the most comprehensive and largest so far in NSW, with 180 people attending. The focus was definitely on 'wellness', not 'illness'.

'The aim is to assist people to manage the impact of the symptoms of MS. It's important to have a positive attitude and not let MS be a dominating feature,' says Robyn Faine, General Manager Services for the MS Society in NSW and Victoria.

One of the biggest challenges in living with MS is managing the fatigue. 'Fatigue is a common symptom because the nerve fibres are not conducting as well as they should be,' says Faine.

Fatigue can be so debilitating that people with MS cite it as the main reason they feel compelled to give up work.

Dawn Prasad, a physiotherapist with the MS Society in Victoria and a speaker at the forum, said that there is evidence to show that exercise can actually reduce fatigue and does not worsen the disease. General aerobic fitness and strength training can also improve muscle performance, assist with balance, enhance mood and improve sleep.

Prasad recommends that people exercise three times a week, and cautions people to take frequent rest breaks and pace themselves.

Other strategies include exercising or undertaking energetic activities in the cool part of the day, keeping hydrated and getting enough sleep.

'We use the analogy of 'banking' energy. For example, if you have a big work function coming up, take it easy and rest in advance.'

Faine also believes that on a day-to-day basis there are many things that people with MS can do to reduce expending energy on mundane tasks. These include the use of labour saving devices, ergonomic products and systems, and convenient storage of items for easy retrieval.

The MS Society can design exercise and fatigue management programs to suit individual needs. Call 1800 CURE MS (1800 287 367) to be linked to an MS Society information and advice line in your State.



**The Lifestyle & Wellbeing forum was made possible via an educational grant from Sanofi-aventis, and was presented by MS Australia (in NSW) and MS Research Australia.*

ROBYN FAINE, GENERAL MANAGER OF CLIENT SERVICES FOR MS SOCIETY NSW AND VIC.



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