HIGHLIGHTS IN THIS ISSUE

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All the staff and students at NCIRS wish you and your families a safe and happy Christmas

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NCIRS Director reflects on the past year

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Two NCIRS staff members participate in a ride to promote Aboriginal Health

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Getting to know NCIRS's Melina Georgousakis and a reminder about our office closure over the Festive Season

Merry Christmas from all of us at NCIRS
A message from the Director

Professor Peter McIntyre

2014 HAS BEEN A YEAR OF SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENT FOR THE HARD-WORKING STAFF OF NCIRS.

Technical work for the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) has been at record levels in terms of the number of advices prepared for the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC) with two key PBAC recommendations for additions to the National Immunisation Program announced on December 19th – reintroduction of the acellular pertussis vaccine booster at 18 months and introduction of zoster vaccine for persons reaching 70 years of age. There has also been a big upsurge in work revising some chapters of the Australian Immunisation Handbook, with the aim for ATAGI to issue annual updates after endorsement by the National Health and Medical Research Council. Work in the vaccine safety has proceeded apace, with NCIRS leading the AusVaxSafety initiative, a coalition of groups from Hunter region in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia and the Paediatric Active Enhanced Disease Surveillance (PAEDS) network of tertiary paediatric hospitals completing a comprehensive retrospective and prospective evaluation of febrile convulsions and their relationship to Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR) vaccine with and without varicella (MMR-V). This culminated in a national Adverse Events workshop, opened by the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Baggoley, in Sydney in late October. The biannual national Immunisation Conference, sponsored by the Public Health Association of Australia, was held in Melbourne in June 2014. This meeting is always an event of major significance on the national landscape and for NCIRS. The conference was particularly well received this year, with several presentations by NCIRS staff, including plenaries by A/Professor Julie Leask, A/Prof Kristine Macartney and Dr Nick Wood. Another significant highlight was final approval of the evaluation of the first 5 years of the national HPV vaccine program from 2007-11, a big task with many key collaborators, scheduled for presentation at the Preventing Cervical Cancer conference in Melbourne in February 2015, for which Dr Aditi Dey and Stephanie Knox at NCIRS deserve special credit.

We are very grateful to all our collaborators and to those who give up their valuable time to advise NCIRS through our Scientific Advisory Committee and Advisory Board. The biannual report covering the two years 2012 and 2013 highlighted the breadth and quality of work over these 2 years and was released in September 2014. Going back further, NCIRS was again highly commended by the external review of our work under the funding agreement with the Australian Government Department of Health for the 5 years 2010-2014. This favourable review led to NCIRS being invited to be the sole tenderer to continue this work from 2015 onwards, with the agreement signed to June 2018 in the week ending December 19th. Preparation of the tender documents was a huge amount of work and special thanks must go to Ms Karyn Phillips, our Manager of Research Operations, for her efforts above and beyond the call of duty in ensuring that everything was in order. Special thanks also go to Ms Elizabeth Koff, Chief Executive, and the resources of the Sydney Children’s Hospital Network, our host institution, which were essential for this task, as well Professor Chris Cowell, Director of Research, and Professor Cheryl Jones, our SAC Chair and Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney, for their essential contributions in the midst of many other commitments.

We at NCIRS wish all our friends, collaborators and stakeholders – the latter being the whole terrific community of immunisation folk in Australia – a very happy Christmas and look forward to a productive New Year.

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STAFF ACHIEVEMENTS & AWARDS

Congratulations!

Dr Gulam Khandaker received a research grant from the Sydney Medical School ECR/New Staff Grants scheme for a project titled “Burden of congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) in Bangladesh and Myanmar: piloting a rapid retrospective assessment model for detection of CRS in developing countries.”
Writing Workshop facilitated by epidemiologist from WHO

IN DECEMBER, JONATHAN POLONSKY FROM COMMUNICATION IN SCIENCE VISITED NCIRS AS PART OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM TO FACILITATE A 2-DAY MANUSCRIPT WRITING WORKSHOP FOR STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC STAFF.

As well as a scientific communicator and editor, Jonathan is an epidemiologist with the World Health Organization and understands first hand the considerations around effectively communicating epidemiological research via peer-reviewed manuscripts. This additional insight meant the workshop was a valuable experience for all staff. We were also very lucky to hear from Jonathan first hand on his recent experiences in West Africa as part of the emergency response to the current Ebola crisis.

Mohamed Tashani, Jonathan Polonsky and Hal Willaby.

Recent additions to the NCIRS website and news on an upgrade to our website in 2015

- November Indigenous Message Stick newsletter available online
- Presentations from the Vaccine Safety Seminar held during October are now available to view and download online

This is also an opportune time to let you know that in an effort for more interactivity as well as faster and easier updates from NCIRS, we are migrating our existing website to a new platform that is more user-friendly, able to interact better with social media and provide better access for you.
Tour Da Country 2014

On November 15th NCIRS staff members Telphia Joseph and Kerrie Wiley set out with a group of bicycle riders for Tour Da Country 2014, a long-distance ride to promote Aboriginal health and reconciliation. The tour riders and support crew were a coming-together of people from a variety of walks of life in support of a very worthy cause.

During week one of the Tour, the group started in Albury-Wodonga on the NSW-Victorian border and rode around 500km to Bega on the NSW South Coast, through the Kosciuszko National Park. Throughout the Tour the group, funded by Medicare Locals, stopped off at various schools and Aboriginal communities to help the Tour founder Dale Wright spread the message about healthy living and the importance of education. The Tour was also supported by Greg Evans from the Roads and Maritime Authority. Greg gave talks to school children about the importance of wearing a helmet, distributing new helmets to kids throughout the tour. Kerrie signed off once the group reached Bega, but Telphia continued on to ride the second leg of the Tour from Bega to Wollongong just south of Sydney. Over the two weeks, the group covered a total of just over 1,000km. This was an amazing opportunity for Telphia and Kerrie to participate in this event promoting Aboriginal health and reconciliation. They both feel fortunate to have met some extraordinary people in the process.
5 minutes with Senior Research Officer Melina Georgousakis

Dr Melina Georgousakis is a medical research scientist who joined NCIRS in 2010. Her research background is in the area of infectious disease and mucosal vaccine development. She completed her PhD at the Queensland Institute of Medical Research, studying the bacterium group A streptococcus. She has published multiple papers in this field. Melina is interested in applying her knowledge and experience in vaccine design to public health research. She is especially interested in the hurdles associated with communicable disease and vaccination in developing countries. Melina is passionate about engaging the public in health and medical science. Melina recently completed her Masters of Public Health from The University of Sydney.

Melina is also the Founder of Franklin Women - Australia’s only community for women working in health and medical research related careers.

1. What does your role at NCIRS entail?
I am a Senior Research Officer within the Policy Support team. This means that most of my day is dedicated to reviewing evidence on the safety and efficacy of vaccines and translating all that info into advice to inform immunisation policy in Australia. This is communicated through the support our team provides to The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) as well as the resources NCIRS produce for immunisation providers. More recently a large part of my role is in managing updates to the immunisation handbook which has been challenging/fun/stressful/rewarding all at once!

2. What issues in immunisation concern you the most?
How to keep innovation going to specifically address barriers with getting these lifesaving interventions to countries who don’t have the finances to buy them or health system to deliver them.

3. What is the most enjoyable part of your role at NCIRS?
Working with my friends. Both at NCIRS and other organisations which we get to deal with on a day to day basis.

4. Describe yourself in three words...
Talks too much.

5. What would you spend your last $5 on...
Happy flowers!

6. Your idea of happiness is...
Happy flowers and cruising down to Balmoral beach with my husband on his funny little scooter.

7. If you could invite three people over for dinner, who would they be?
Amy Poehler (because I identify with her character in Parks in Recreations so much and she is an awesome advocate for women). Khloe Kardashian (don’t judge - I am weirdly obsessed with this family!) and finally, my Greek grandmother who passed away when I was young and who I would loved to have talked more with.

8. If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
Being able to fly (or maybe a better word is hover as I don’t want to get too high, just be able to have a birds eye view of things and get to places faster if I need to because I am super impatient).

9. Do you have any hidden talents?
Hmm. Not really. I am pretty good at making sure everyone knows about any talents (or flaws) I have….

10. If you weren’t working at NCIRS YOU WOULD BE...
So many things. A lady of leisure perhaps, renovating houses, working with a humanitarian aid organisation in Sri Lanka or India. Making Franklin Women (a community for women in the health field) even more awesome.

FOR YOUR DIARY

OFFICE CLOSURE DURING CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR

Please be aware that NCIRS will close from Wednesday 24 December. We will re-open our office on Monday 5 January 2015.