



“ We are working in multidisciplinary teams to broaden our scope, with the goal of creating a comprehensive picture of the causes and processes of the illness”

Dr Ans Vercammen, Cognitive Neuroscientist.



## Childhood Adversity: A risk factor

What happens to us when we are young has long-lasting implications, and research is increasingly uncovering that childhood adversity is associated with elevated risk for a wide range of adult psychiatric disorders, including schizophrenia.

A recent study by a team of Institute researchers, headed by Kathryn McCabe, has investigated a wide range of potential adverse childhood events, such as parent or sibling loss, divorce or separation, poverty and disadvantage and abuse, and their implications in schizophrenia.

The study, which utilised data from the Institute’s Australian Schizophrenia Research Bank, examined the rates of childhood adversity in schizophrenia compared to healthy controls, as well as its relationship to different types of symptoms.

The study found that people with schizophrenia report more exposure to adverse childhood events than those without the illness. The severity of positive symptoms – such as auditory hallucinations, delusions, disordered thoughts and behaviours

– were also correlated with rates of childhood trauma.

Another group of Institute researchers, lead by Sandy Mattheson, undertook a systematic review of studies of childhood adversity in schizophrenia compared to a range of other mental disorders. They found that childhood adversity was greater in schizophrenia than in anxiety disorders, but there were no differences in rates of childhood adversity between schizophrenia, depression, affective psychoses and personality disorders.



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# CEO's Report

Our network of scientists reaches across Australia; we foster international collaborations and cover broad scientific fields of research. These networks and opportunities to connect with cross-disciplinary teams of researchers allow us to develop multiple perspectives on schizophrenia through which to look for greater understanding of its causes and hence discover better treatments.

One of the many ways that we foster this collaboration is by bringing our scientists together for Scientific Summits. These summits allow our scientists to showcase the advances in their research and share information on the latest insights. These meetings bring together scientists

from genetics, cognitive neuroscience, epidemiology and neurobiology.

At this year's summit, held on 13 February, we reviewed the Institute's research in neurobiology in which our scientists have undertaken a program of work focusing on Neuregulin 1, a candidate susceptibility gene for schizophrenia, and the mechanisms for its effects on neural development. In cognitive neuroscience a more disparate range of studies has examined brain structure and function using different technologies, including in some instances the role of genetic factors in brain function. The epidemiology group reported its work in child development studies.



Prof. Vaughan Carr, Chief Executive Officer

The big challenge now, is to ask how we can bring these fields together in a coherent, integrated program of research in which each scientific discipline supports and complements the others in addressing critical questions about the development of schizophrenia.

## Meet our Researcher



Dr Ans Vercammen is a Post Doctoral Research Officer and an Institute Affiliated Scientist associated with the Schizophrenia Research Laboratory\*.

\*The Schizophrenia Research Laboratory is a joint initiative of the Schizophrenia Research Institute, University of NSW, Neuroscience Research Australia (NeuRA) and the Macquarie Group Foundation. It is supported by NSW Health.

In recognition of her dedication and research achievements, Dr Vercammen was recently recognised with the Institute's Early Career Researcher Award, which included \$7000 to support the continuation of her research into the neural mechanisms underlying the signs and symptoms of schizophrenia.

**Q** What research are you currently involved with?

**A** One of the areas that I am investigating is the neural basis of cognitive deficits and specific symptoms in schizophrenia. We also use that knowledge to devise novel therapeutic approaches, including the use of brain stimulation techniques to treat auditory hallucinations and cognitive problems, such as working memory and learning.

I am also involved in a clinical trial currently being undertaken at the Schizophrenia Research Laboratory, investigating the effect of a hormone receptor modulator as an adjunctive medication for people with schizophrenia.

**Q** What has been the greatest challenge of your work?

**A** The fact that schizophrenia is a heterogeneous illness: there is not a single cause, and the course of the illness varies a lot from one person to the next. Working in schizophrenia research has taught me that the techniques and knowledge that we borrow from 'normal' neuropsychology aren't always applicable to illnesses such as schizophrenia, and that we need to be innovative about the way we approach the study of this illness.

**Q** What do you find most fulfilling about your work?

**A** The contact with and the positive reactions from participants, as well as the interaction between scientists from different backgrounds such as psychology, neurobiology and genetics. Due to the complex nature of the illness, we are working in multidisciplinary teams to broaden our scope, with the goal of creating a comprehensive picture of the causes and processes of the illness.

### Research Volunteers Needed

Research volunteers are still needed to take part in the Schizophrenia Research Laboratory's hormone modulator drug trial in Sydney. For further information contact Alice Rothwell on (02) 9399 1683 or a.rothwell@neura.edu.au

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# Scoping Online Mental Health Assessments

Australia is a nation that spans great distances and many people live far from regional centres or capital cities where health and support services are located. These distances can be a barrier for accessing treatment or medical advice for a range of physical and mental illnesses.

Young people living in rural areas who are experiencing early psychosis may not have access to early neuropsychological assessments and relevant clinical expertise, which are necessary for comprehensive clinical evaluations and treatment planning.

Institute researcher Dr Helen Stain has investigated the use of video-conferencing for the assessments, which are used to confirm diagnosis, assess quality of life and neurocognitive functioning.

Dr Stain and the team at the University of Newcastle discovered that video-conference assessments are as reliable as face-to-face assessments for young people experiencing early psychosis.

This broadens the scope for early intervention and better access to specialist services, and may eventually change the service delivery model in rural or underserved areas.



## Running for Gold

This year you can jump the queues at the City2Surf and start at the front of the pack as a Gold Charity participant for the Schizophrenia Research Institute.

Held on Sunday 12 August in Sydney, the City2Surf is a popular event that is filled to capacity each year. The Gold Charity places are limited and designated for City2Surf participants who would like to make fundraising the focus of the run.

You'll get to start the City2Surf in your own designated Gold Charity start group with unique gold bibs, behind *The Sun-Herald* (Red) group and in front of the Green starters in Park Street.

Please note, as places are limited, the Institute will allocate the entries to runners on the strength of their commitment to fundraising, with a minimum target of \$1000, including a \$250 participant donation. If you would like to take part as a Schizophrenia Research Institute Gold Charity Entry then contact us on (02) 9295 8688 or [contact@schizophreniaresearch.org.au](mailto:contact@schizophreniaresearch.org.au)



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## Give it up for Schizophrenia

Registrations are now open for SwearStop, the annual online awareness and fundraising campaign for the Institute, held 14 – 20 May.

This is your chance to get involved, raise some funds and spread the word about our work. It's really simple, you just sign up at [www.swearstop.com.au](http://www.swearstop.com.au), swear to give up swearing, and then ask all your friends, colleagues and family to show their support by sponsoring you for your efforts.

Swearing is more common than you think – and so is mental illness. Help stop the negative voices.

With Ambassadors such as Dee Madigan from *The Gruen Transfer*, comedienne Corinne Grant, guys from *Bondi Rescue*, TV personality Julie McCrossin, Nate Myles from the Gold Coast Titans, former *MasterChef* contestant Courtney Roulston, and Miss World Australia 2010 Ashleigh Francis supporting the cause this year. It is sure to be a lot of fun.

You can do it alone or set up a team and go head to head against colleagues or friends in a SwearStop challenge.

*Register Now!*

[www.swearstop.com.au](http://www.swearstop.com.au)

**Win a new iPad!**

See website for details.

## Upcoming Events

Participate in any of the following events and you can fundraise for the Institute:

**20 May**  
*Sydney Morning Herald*  
Half Marathon

**30 June - 1 July**  
Gold Coast Airport  
Marathon

**15 July**  
*The Age Run Melbourne*

**12 August**  
*The Sun-Herald City2Surf*  
\*contact us to find out how to get your Gold Charity Entry

**26 August**  
Sunshine Coast Marathon  
& Community Run Festival

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## Welcome to Kel Beckett



The Institute's new Director of Development, Kel Beckett has commenced, replacing Helen Connealy who moved on from her role late last year.

Kel has extensive experience in not-for-profits as a manager and a consultant, and is an executive committee member of the Fundraising Institute of Australia.

"The Institute is made up not only of the scientists and staff that work together everyday, we are a part of a wide community comprising families, businesses and organisations who all share one common goal: to further the understanding of this debilitating illness," said Kel.

"In the short time I have been at the Institute I am inspired by the level of passion and commitment of the scientists for their work and the generosity of its supporters at all levels," he said. "I look forward to meeting as many of them as I can in the coming months."

## Schizophrenia International Research Society



Congratulations to Professor Cyndi Shannon Weickert who was recently elected as a member of the International Advisory Council of the Schizophrenia International Research Society, a worldwide organisation that aims to bring together researchers in schizophrenia and related disorders in order to exchange ideas and results, and facilitate international collaboration in research.

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## Award Recipients

The Institute is dedicated to supporting the professional growth of our young scientists. They are at a critical point in their careers and rely on support for their work until they are able to secure their own funding.

Each year, in recognition of dedication and achievements, the Institute gives awards to some of the most gifted early career researchers and post graduate students.

Dr Ans Vercammen received the Early Career Researcher Award and \$7000 to support her research. See page 2 for full details.

This year two Postgraduate Student Awards were presented with \$3000 going to support each recipient.

Erin Gardiner is based at the University of Newcastle and is investigating microRNA and the potential to identify biomarkers in peripheral blood lymphocytes.

Duncan Sinclair is based at the Schizophrenia Research Laboratory and is working to understand how the glucocorticoid receptor, which is involved in stress signalling, develops normally across the lifespan and how this receptor system is affected in schizophrenia.



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## More Volunteers Needed

The Australian Schizophrenia Research Bank is still recruiting.

We need people with schizophrenia who are willing to participate in a clinical interview and neuropsychological testing, have a MRI brain scan, and donate a blood sample for genetic studies.

The Australian Schizophrenia Research Bank now has over 1700 volunteers, with nearly 1200 who have completed the assessment program. This includes around 700 people with schizophrenia.

This is a fantastic commitment from each and every one of our volunteers who are contributing to a research resource that provides a unique dataset, opening a world of possibilities to further schizophrenia research in the quest to understand this illness.

If you or someone you know would like to help, please call 1800 639 295 to see if you are eligible to take part.

# Thank You

## ICAP Charity Day



Institute Ambassador Marcia Hines making a trade at Charity Day

The Institute was lucky to be one of a small number of not-for-profits who were invited to take part in the annual ICAP Charity Day, with \$30,000 donated to the Institute.

ICAP is a broker of risk and information services with offices around the world. This year over 60 offices took part in Charity Day, with all the revenue and commissions raised on the day donated to charity. Thank you to the Sydney ICAP office for inviting the Institute to participate in this amazing event.

## Newman's Own Foundation

A big thank you to the Newman's Own Foundation for the support of nearly \$25,000. We recognise the support of the family of Paul Sterling-Lewis who were instrumental in securing this donation.

## Our thanks

### Major Partners and Supporters

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Many thanks to all of our supporters who have renewed their commitment to us and donated recently (September 2011 – April 2012).

For privacy reasons we have chosen not to list all our individual supporters but would like to take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge their generosity. The commitment of the community is vital to our ongoing success.

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#### Community Groups

CFMEU NSW Branch

New South Wales Nurses' Association

## In Memoriam

Our thoughts are with founding member and long term staff member Alan Tunbridge who lost his partner, Dawn Tyack. We offer our condolences and send thanks to Alan and his family and friends for their donations to the Institute in Dawn's memory.

## Contact Us

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