



Australasian Research Institute located on the campus of Sydney Adventist Hospital.

Photo courtesy of Ross Grant.

# Australasian Research Institute

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## CAROLYN RICKETT, AND PAUL RACE

Associate professor Carolyn Rickett is associate dean (Research) and lectures in Communication, Nursing, and Chaplaincy at Avondale University College. Her research in medical humanities and chaplaincy also informs her professional and pastoral contribution to Sydney Adventist Hospital's spiritual care team.

Paul Race, Ph.D. (Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia) is currently the dean of faculty of Arts, Nursing and Theology at Avondale University College. His association with the Sydney Adventist Hospital spans many years as a registered nurse, nurse unit manager and then as an academic overseeing the nurse training program based at the hospital before he moved into his current role. He is married with two adult children and enjoys an active lifestyle of running, mountain biking and racquet sports.

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The Australasian Research Institute (ARI) began July 20, 2004, to coordinate research activities within the Sydney Adventist Hospital (SAH) and also conduct and promote research in association with other Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) organizations and the community.<sup>1</sup>

The Institute, located on the campus of SAH and established to operate within the ethos of the SAH, had as a primary purpose the betterment of humanity.<sup>2</sup> The ARI works in conjunction with the Adventist Health Ministries of the South Pacific Division, Avondale University College, and the Australian Health & Nutrition Association Limited, operating as the Sanitarium Health and Wellbeing Company.

The ARI corporate structure seeks to maximize the benefits of donor funding in support of research. Set up as an incorporated association on September 1, 2003, it received tax deductible gift recipient status on November 21, 2005, as a health promotion charity. It registered a business name of "Australasian Health Research Institute" in 2004 and in March 2013 the business names of "Lifestyle Medicine and Research Centre" as well as "Centre for Lifestyle Medicine and Research." But ARI canceled the business name of Lifestyle Medicine and Research Centre in July 2019.<sup>3</sup>

The Australian Federal Minister for Health, Dr Brendan Nelson, and respected commentator and general practitioner, Dr John Knight (aka James Wright), officially opened ARI.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ross Grant, appointed executive officer, continues to lead the ARI as of February 2020. A management committee of six members comprising the chief executive officer (CEO) of SAH; the CEO of Sanitarium Health Food Company; the health director of the South Pacific Division; the president of Avondale University College; the chair of the Research Advisory Committee; and the executive officer of the ARI maintain oversight of the institute. Initially ARI was housed within the offices of the faculty of nursing and health at SAH. Any testing and other laboratory work, however, took place in other facilities. In 2012 expanded facilities consisting of office accommodations as well as laboratory facilities became available for ARI on the SAH estate. The Premier of NSW, Barry O'Farrell, opened the new facilities.<sup>5</sup> They greatly increased the capacity for research with the addition of high-tech analytical and diagnostic equipment for high-pressure liquid chromatography, mass spectrometry, immunology-based analytics, an ultrasound, macular carotenoid eye scanner, cell culture, and a cryopreservation unit.<sup>6</sup>

ARI's objectives were initially quite broad and included both undertaking and commissioning research while cooperating with other organizations or individuals. It was to conduct or commission research in health care in regards to causation, prevention or cure of disease, conduct or commission research into nutrition, especially in regards to health and health food products, educate the public about relevant research, use funds to promote research amongst the member organizations, provide advice and expertise in regard to analysis and writing, as well as seek funds to supplement those provided by member organizations.

To stimulate research activities, ARI funded a series of competitive grants from seed funds provided primarily by SAH but assisted by Avondale and donors. To foster research in the collaborating institutions, a key requirement for receiving a grant was the involvement of SAH or Avondale staff in significant ways within any funded activities. The grants consisted of a scholarship to the value of \$1,500 for projects, a small grant for less than \$5,000, and a full grant of between \$5,000 and \$30,000 for significant research projects.

The ARI Research Advisory Committee, established to review grant requests, consisted of 12 academic/professional researchers from various universities and affiliated entities. They initially included associate professor Eric Magnusson (RAC chair), School of Physical Environmental and Mathematical Sciences, ADFA, UNSW; Dr Ross Grant (RAC sec.), School of Medical Sciences, UNSW; Dr. Bevan Hokin Director, clinical laboratories, Sydney Adventist Hospital; associate professor George Smythe, deputy director, Bioanalytical Mass Spectrometry Facility, School of Medical Sciences, UNSW; Dr. Paul Race, dean, faculty of nursing and health, Avondale University College; Dr. Bruno Gaeta, program director, bioinformatics, School of Computer Science and Engineering, UNSW; Dr. Tom Borody, consultant gastroenterologist, director, Centre for Digestive Diseases; Dr. Robyn Pearce, dietetics researcher in the Avondale Lifestyle and Health Research Centre, Avondale University College; Professor Sandra Capra, School of Health Sciences, Nutrition and Dietetics, University of Newcastle; Dr. Bruce Farnsworth, consultant gynecologist, director, Centre for Pelvic Reconstructive Surgery, Sydney Adventist Hospital; associate professor Gillian Heller, department of statistics, Macquarie University; and Dr. Darren Morton, lifestyle education, visual arts and graphic design, Avondale University College. Grants from ARI ceased being offered several years later as funding pressures on the operations of the ARI forced withdrawal of the program. The ARI had intended to be self-supporting within three years of its commencement but had not achieved that aim.

The focus of research undertaken by the ARI itself has been on lifestyle related illness and the effect of diet on disease and longevity, particular on oxidative stress. It reflected the professional background of the director, Dr. Ross Grant, whose background in clinical biochemistry and pharmacology supported this direction. It had also become apparent that the initial objectives of ARI were overly broad and it made the decision to narrow its attention to health and medical research. Early projects included research into coronary heart disease, cardiovascular health and nutrition related to teen health, herbal sleep remedies, gluten intolerance, adolescent resilience, and wound care products and impact on tissue granulation.<sup>7 8</sup> The ARI also occasionally produced publications related to educating the community on health issues. An example of such a publication is "Carotenoids and Your Health" that detailed the benefits of eating carotenoids, gave an overview of related research at ARI, and provided a few recipes for juices high in carotenoids.<sup>9</sup>

A major boost for the work of the ARI came in 2007 from a fundraising dinner arranged by the Novus Foundation (a local area philanthropic group familiar with Sydney Adventist Hospital) in association with the local Wahroonga Rotary Club and the McCarroll Automotive Group, all which have been strong supporters of the Sydney Adventist Hospital in the local community. The dinner raised in excess of \$100,000 for a study into

adolescent obesity focusing on molecular level changes that trigger diabetes in such individuals.<sup>10</sup> Since 2012 the ARI has also raised more than \$2.5 million in research funding from competitive grants, commercial services, and philanthropic donations.<sup>11</sup>

The ARI demonstrates its ongoing commitment to support the broader mission of the SDA Church's promotion of health and well-being with its focused activity on:

1) Increasing understanding of how lifestyle choices effect an individual's biochemistry, leading them into a diseased state, thereby helping to make intervention strategies more targeted to the individual and therefore more efficient in producing desired health outcomes;

2) applying appropriate research methodology to uncover and/or clarify the basis for some historical Adventist beliefs on health (e.g., caffeine use) which when understood will serve to strengthen the church community's confidence and participation in healthy living and thereby feel confident to promote this to the community in an evidence-informed way;

3) participating in academic health and medical research and education forums and conferences;

4) participating in church and community health lectures and other health education forums to increase understanding on how disease happens (particularly those related to lifestyle) and assisting those audiences in formulating effective change strategies;

5) developing or helping develop diagnostic tests, programs, and associated tools for use by professional and/or community members to assist in their goal of complete wellness.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2012 the ARI has also provided projects and supervision for six Doctor of Philosophy students with four graduating to date, along with supervision for six research honors students. The important contribution to new knowledge in the area of lifestyle and health is evidenced by ARI researchers disseminating findings at more than 100 conferences with more than 70 articles published in medical and scientific peer-reviewed journals.<sup>13</sup> Publication details and profiling of key ARI research projects is accessible on the Institute's website.<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

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