



**Western**  
Alliance

Academic Health Science Centre



# 2023-2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Western Alliance Health Research Ltd  
(Western Alliance)





## Our vision

Healthy rural and regional western Victoria communities benefitting from evidence-based and research-informed healthcare.

## Our purpose

To improve community health and wellbeing by supporting our members to generate translational research and apply research evidence in their practice.

## Our focus

Strengthening health sector-led collaborative research and research translation in the domains of:

- population and public health
- clinical care
- health systems

## Our values

### Collaboration

Success requires positive and respectful relationships and ongoing collaboration between consumers, Aboriginal Community, clinicians, researchers, health services, primary care, universities and other organisations.

### Access

Rural and regional communities deserve fair local access to research-enabled quality health care.

### Excellence

To achieve the potential of our partnership, we must strive towards excellence in what we do and learn, grow, evolve and improve continuously.

### Impact

High quality research and translation lead to measurable impact and improvements in community and individual health and wellbeing.



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## About Us

Western Alliance Academic Health Science Centre (Western Alliance) was established in 2014 and incorporated as a registered health promotion charity (Western Alliance Health Research Ltd) in 2016. It is Australia's first rural and regionally focused academic health science centre.

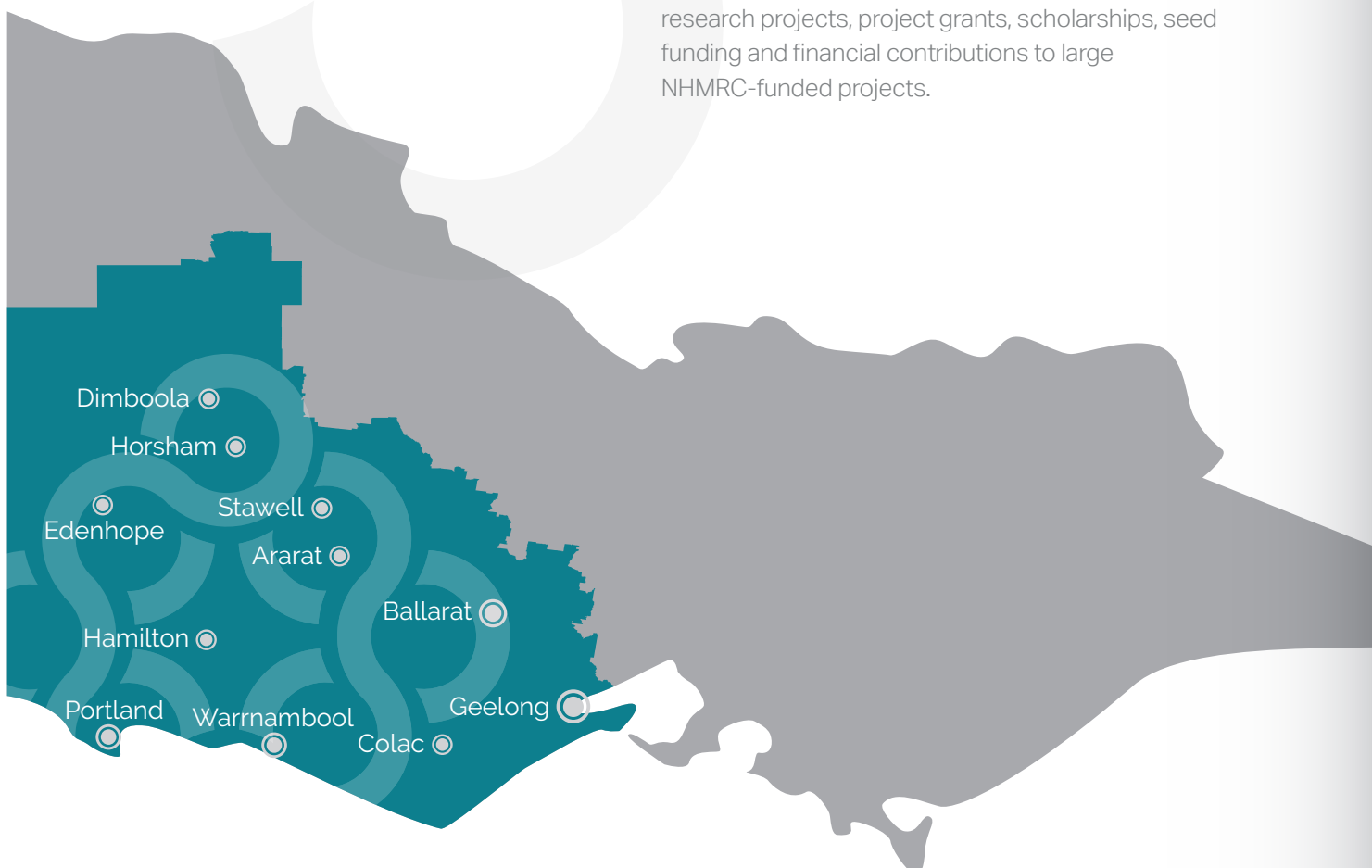
In 2021, Western Alliance received NHMRC 'Emerging Research Translation Centre' status in recognition of our work in research translation, research excellence and workforce development, as well as building capability/capacity in research and research translation.

Western Alliance is comprised of 11 member organisations located across the Barwon/Southwest and Grampians regions of western Victoria. Members include eight public health services, a primary health network and two universities. The two regions have a combined population of over 700,000 residents or approximately 44% of rural/ regional Victoria's population.

Western Alliance supports the development of healthier regional and rural communities. This is in recognition of the significantly poorer health outcomes experienced by people living in the Barwon/South West and Grampians regions of Victoria compared to their metropolitan counterparts. The challenges that affect the health of people living in western Victoria include distance and major variations in access to healthcare, lower socio-economic status and poorer infrastructure.

The key function of Western Alliance is to support the development of the capability and capacity of our members to conduct research relevant to regional health and to support the implementation of research-based and evidence-informed healthcare across western Victoria. Western Alliance has established important collaborations with leading national and state-based organisations to improve our capacity to support research in our priority themes.

To date, Western Alliance has supported **72 health research translation projects**, including flagship research projects, project grants, scholarships, seed funding and financial contributions to large NHMRC-funded projects.





In addition, Western Alliance is a lead organisation in the DELIVER project (Delivering Enhanced healthcare at home through optimising Virtual tools for older people in Rural and regional Australia), a five-year, \$9 million Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) research project that is identifying and building a suite of programs to improve and extend in-home healthcare and is further building health research capacity and capability across the region.

The Alliance delivers a broad research education program, including funding for multi-year research fellowships, and the STaRR (Supporting Translation of Research in Rural and Regional Health Settings) training program and resource library for mentors, managers and health practitioners. It also provides critical 'on-the-ground' support to members through

three health service-embedded Research Translation Coordinators located across the Barwon/Southwest and Grampians regions.

Our 2023 - 2026 strategic plan is dedicated to strengthening health sector-led collaborative research and research translation in the domains of population and public health, clinical care and health systems.





# Our Strategic Objectives

The Western Alliance Strategic Plan was developed through extensive consultation with each of our member health services during 2023. This involved a full day facilitated workshop, during which Board members participated in a strategy setting exercise, along with ongoing individual and Board-level discussion and feedback.

Four clear strategic objectives were identified, each accompanied by a series of interdependent strategic activities.

Stronger partnerships and collaborations for translational research and research translation



Creating an enabling environment for translational research and research translation



Building the capacity and capability of individuals and teams for translational research and research translation



Targeted support and funding to accelerate the translation of research into health policy and practice





# Our Research Priorities

In 2023, Western Alliance member health services and the Western Victoria Primary Health Network (PHN) completed a survey to identify priorities that could be addressed through translational research and/or research translation. These data were analysed and collated using a modified Delphi approach. From this, an integrated list of priorities was developed with input from Board members and members of the Western Alliance Research Translation Committee.

This approach allowed for the recognition of diverse perspectives to arrive at a high level of agreement.



Aboriginal health



Chronic and  
complex care  
(including cancer)



Digital health,  
telehealth and  
home-based care



Health workforce  
wellbeing and  
sustainability



Healthy ageing



Mental health



Primary care and  
prevention of  
admission to hospital



Women's and  
children's health and  
wellbeing





## Our Funded Studies

Since its establishment, Western Alliance has funded 72 research translation projects in alignment with our identified research priorities. The Alliance has contributed \$2.95 million to these studies, which have attracted over \$26 million in external funding. These include:



### Chronic and complex care (including cancer)

- 19 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$594,837 External funding: \$9,998,055



### Digital health, telehealth and home-based care

- 4 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$134,312



### Aboriginal health

- 3 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$199,797 External funding: \$25,000



### Mental health

- 7 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$277,693, External funding: \$1,950,000



### Primary care and prevention of admission to hospital

- 8 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$404,248



### Women's and children's health and wellbeing

- 13 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$756,377 External funding: \$5,060,325



### Health workforce wellbeing and sustainability

- 11 Projects, Western Alliance funding \$313,066 External funding: \$17,500



### Healthy ageing

- 7 projects, Western Alliance funding \$269,377. External funding: \$9,100,000

For further details of these projects, please visit [www.westernalliance.org.au](http://www.westernalliance.org.au)



# Our Members

Western Alliance's eleven member organisations comprise two major regional city-based health services: Grampians Health and Barwon Health; six regional and rural health services: Colac Area Health, East Grampians Health Service, South West Healthcare, Western District Health Service, Maryborough District Health Service and Portland District Health; the Western Victoria Primary Health Network (PHN); and two regionally based academic institutions: Deakin and Federation Universities.

*Western Alliance acknowledges the valuable input and contribution of our member organisations, who have been critical for the translation of research into clinical practice, policy and administrative processes for the benefit of patients and communities.*

**This year we welcomed Maryborough District Health Service (MDHS) as a member of Western Alliance.**

MDHS is progressive rural healthcare provider in the heart of the Victorian Central Goldfields, providing care across all stages of life from pre-natal and newborn babies to aged care recipients, and their families and carers.





# Our People

## Western Alliance Board 2023/2024

Name	Organisation
Professor Brendan Crotty (Chair)	Independent
Mr Dale Fraser (Treasurer)	Grampians Health
Ms Nickola Allan	Maryborough District Health (from November 2023)
Ms Fiona Brew	Colac Area Health
Ms Rowena Clift	Western Victoria Primary Health Network (until December 2023) and Western District Health Service (from February 2024)
Ms Frances Diver	Barwon Health
Mr Rohan Fitzgerald	Western District Health Service
Mr Craig Fraser	South West Healthcare
Professor Rachel Huxley	Deakin University
A/Professor Nicole Mercer	Aboriginal representative – Deakin University (from May 2024)
A/Professor Gabrielle O'Kane	Independent - former CEO, National Rural Health Alliance (until August 2023)
Professor Warren Payne	Western Alliance
Mr Mario Santilli	East Grampians Health Service
Ms Samantha Sharp	Portland District Health (until November 2023)
Ms Katherine Stanley	Consumer representative (from May 2024)
Professor Shane Thomas	Federation University
Professor Alison Verhoeven	Independent - former CEO, Australian Healthcare and Hospital Association (until March 2024)

## DELIVER Program Governance Subcommittee

Name	Organisation
Professor Brendan Crotty (Chair)	Independent
Mr Dale Fraser	Grampians Health
A/Professor Kate Huggins	Deakin University
Professor Warren Payne	Western Alliance
Professor Rachel Huxley	Deakin University
Professor Anna Peeters	Deakin University



## Research Translation Committee

Name	Organisation
A/Professor Anna Wong Shee (Chair)	Grampians Health
Professor Steven Allender	Deakin University
Dr Laura Alston	Colac Area Health
Mr Drew Aras	Western Alliance
Dr Jaclyn Bishop	East Grampians Health Service
Ms Alicia Boyd	St John of God
Professor Colette Browning	Federation University
Professor Susan Brumby	National Centre for Farmer Health
Ms Ashleigh Clarke	Grampians Health
Ms Leah Damman	South West Healthcare
Mrs Marilyn Dolling	Consumer Representative
Dr Michael Field	Colac Area Health/ Western Alliance
Mr Andrew Giddy	Western Victoria Primary Health Network
Professor Fergal Grace	Federation University
Dr Louise Greenstock	Western District Health Service/ Western Alliance
Ms Sarah Healy	Community and Research Network (CARN)/ Deakin University
A/Professor Kate Huggins	Deakin University
Professor Alison Hutchison	Barwon Health
Dr Olivia King	Western Alliance/ Barwon Health
Dr Ella Ottrey	East Grampians Health Service/ Western Alliance
Professor Warren Payne	Western Alliance
Professor Anna Peeters	Deakin University
Dr Alesha Sayner	Grampians Health Service/ Western Alliance
Professor Vincent Versace	Deakin Rural Health
Professor Peter Vuillermin	Barwon Health
Dr Emma West	Deakin University
A/Professor Mark Yates	Grampians Health

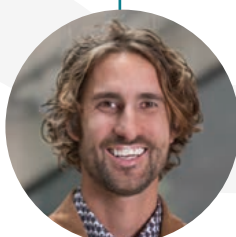


## Our Employees and Funded Positions



**Professor Warren Payne**

Executive Director



**Drew Aras**

Chief Operating Officer



**Sarah Shaw**

Research  
Communications  
Officer



**Cassandra Hamilton**

Administrative Officer



**Dr Olivia King**

Research Capability  
Building Program  
Manager



**Peter Kelly**

Consumer & Community  
Involvement Lead/  
Research Capability  
Building Program Officer



**Charlotte Molesworth**

Biostatistician



**Dr Michael Field**

Research Translation  
Coordinator -  
Barwon/Colac



**Dr Ella Ottrey**

Research Translation  
Coordinator -  
East Grampians &  
Maryborough



**Alesha Sayner**

Research Translation  
Coordinator -  
Grampians



**Dr Jessie Adams**

Research Translation  
Coordinator -  
South West







## Our Structure

Western Alliance operates as a company limited by guarantee and is registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

Management leadership of Western Alliance is provided by the Executive Director, Professor Warren Payne and Chief Operating Officer, Mr Drew Aras. Mr Aras is registered as the Alliance's Company Secretary and Mr Dale Fraser, CEO Grampians Health, is the Alliance's Treasurer.

## Western Alliance Organisational Structure

### Board of Management

Western Alliance is an Incorporated Association and Registered Charity, governed by a Board of Management. The Board is comprised of the CEOs (or representatives) of each member organisation along with four Directors who have been appointed based on their skills or background.

The Board meets bi-monthly at which time it receives financial reports, including long term (three year) financial projections to monitor sustainability and progress.

### Research Translation Committee

The Western Alliance Research Translation Committee, established in 2019, is a standing sub-committee of the Western Alliance Board. The Research Translation Committee includes individuals from its member organisations who have strong clinical and/or research skills as well as an Aboriginal representative and two consumer representatives.

### DELIVER Program Governance Subcommittee

The DELIVER program management reports to the Western Alliance Board via a Board sub-committee which is comprised of Board members and DELIVER management. The DELIVER program is led by the Western Alliance Principal Research Translation Investigator and Director of the Deakin University Institute for Health Transformation, Professor Anna Peeters AM and is managed by Associate Professor Kate Huggins.

DELIVER has 23 Chief Investigators and its internal governance structure includes an Investigator Leadership Committee, five working groups and an external Advisory Committee. Aboriginal leadership within DELIVER is provided by the involvement of an Aboriginal researcher, Fiona Mitchell, as one of the Chief Investigators while consumer engagement has been facilitated by the appointment of a Consumer Liaison Officer. The DELIVER governance bodies include a balance of health service, primary care, and academic members.



# Chairperson's Report



Western Alliance has worked hard to further consolidate its activities, as well as implement a range of exciting new initiatives during the 2023/2024 financial year.

We undertook an extensive process to develop our Strategic Plan 2023- 2026 and to refresh our research priorities. Our activity during this financial year strongly aligns with this plan and will continue to do so over the next two years.

## Highlights during the year included:

- Strengthening our consumer and community involvement and advancement of Aboriginal-led research, including the appointments of Katherine Stanley and Associate Professor Nicole Mercer to the Western Alliance Board as consumer and Aboriginal representatives respectively, continuing support of CARN (Community and Research Network), becoming a member of the Lowitja Institute, (Australia's only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health research institute), and aligning Western Alliance activities with the newly launched marra ngarrgoo, marra goorri (The Victorian Aboriginal Health, Medical and Wellbeing Research Accord).
- Allocating over \$300,000 in funding to 13 translation-focussed health research projects across western Victoria, with four of these projects attracting a further \$9.55M in external grant income.
- Allocating \$90,000 to two Higher Degree by Research (HDR) Fellows.
- Further expansion of our STaRR (Supporting Translation of Research in Rural and Regional Settings) capability building program, which supported training for over 120 emerging researchers across the region.
- Expanding the Australian Clinical Trials Education Centre (A-CTEC), which now provides free, high quality clinical trials training to over 8000 members of the clinical trials workforce in Australia (including over 300 from Western Alliance member organisations).
- Showcasing over 40 local research translation projects to over 120 health professionals, research and community members at our annual symposium in Warrnambool.

I would like to thank all our member organisations for your ongoing support of Western Alliance. I thank all members of our Board and Research Translation Committee, particularly Professor Gabrielle O'Kane, Ms Alison Verhoeven and Ms Samantha Sharp, who stepped down during the year, and welcome new Board members, Ms Katherine Stanley and Associate Professor Nicole Mercer.

***I look forward to continuing to work with you all as we pursue our vision of healthy rural and regional western Victoria communities benefitting from evidence-based and research-informed healthcare***

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brendan Crotty'.

**Emeritus Professor Brendan Crotty,  
Board Chair  
Western Alliance Academic  
Health Science Centre**



Each of our activities align with our four strategic objectives across our research priorities:



## Objective: Partnerships and Collaboration

**DELIVER (Delivering Enhanced healthcare at home through optimising Virtual tools for older people in Rural and regional Australia)**



**DELIVER**  
Research for better healthcare  
closer to home

Western Alliance, as the lead organisation, in partnership with the Deakin University Institute for Health Transformation, Monash University and the University of Melbourne, was awarded a 5-year, \$9 million research project grant by the Federal Government Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) in late 2021.

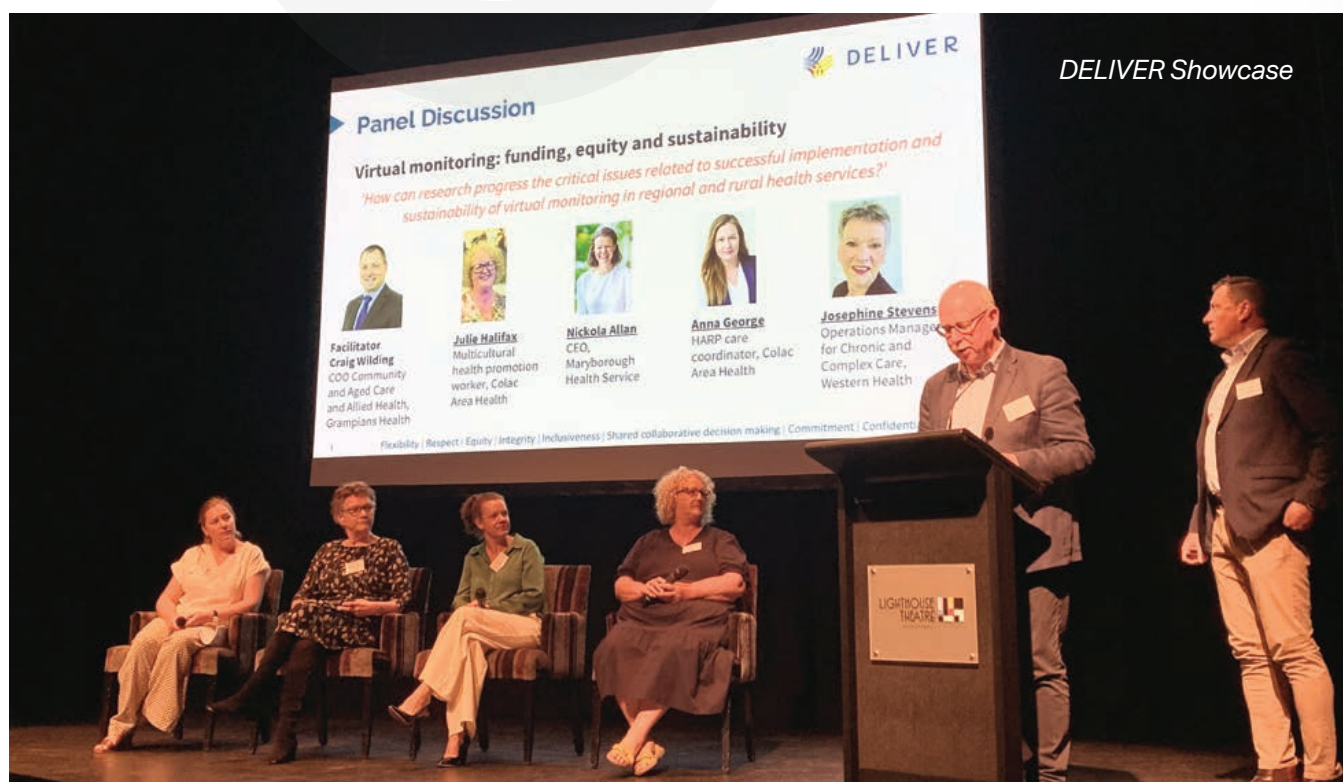
The DELIVER project brings together, for the first time, rural healthcare providers, consumers, academic health science centres, universities, and national peak bodies to:

1. improve healthcare at home for older people in regional and rural areas using rapid research

translation, digital tools and co-design; and

2. implement a sustainable capacity building model to support rapid research translation for regional and rural health services.

Since being formally awarded the MRFF grant in early 2022, the DELIVER team have built the foundations of the project and have moved into the co-design and priority setting phase, where the team is working with health service representatives and consumers to build understanding of the home-based healthcare and research systems, and to identify opportunities for the DELIVER research team to support evaluation and practice innovation.



DELIVER Showcase





**Deakin Distinguished  
Professor Anna Peeters**

*DELIVER Program Director*



**A/Professor Kate Huggins**

*DELIVER Program Manager*

**Other activities include:**

- development of a new rapid evidence summary process whereby embedded researchers develop evidence syntheses tailored to critical health service questions to support service delivery improvement and innovation;
- an insights study to understand priority aims for remote patient monitoring has commenced;
- commencement of systems mapping workshops across the Barwon South West and Grampians regions to identify factors that increase uptake of home-based care and local solutions;
- administration of the internationally validated Research Culture and Capability survey across the region's health services;
- commencement of a webinar series, featuring the Victorian Department of Health on their digital health strategy, Dr Olivia Metcalf on the state of the evidence for remote patient monitoring, A/Professor Michelle Callisaya on lessons learned undertaking co-design with older people with dementia and Dr Shannon Nott on embedding virtual care in rural and regional healthcare;
- launch of the DELIVER website;
- completion of several evidence syntheses to inform capacity building training and working with consumers;
- building of site investigator teams and appointment of DELIVER research and translation staff; and
- staging the DELIVER Showcase as part of the Western Alliance Symposium, followed by the DELIVER All-Investigator Day.



## SECTION 3 Our Activities

### Australian Health Research Alliance (AHRA)



Western Alliance has been recognised by the NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) as an Emerging Research Translation Centre.

This recognition has occurred as part of a rigorous accreditation process and enables Western Alliance to become a member of AHRA (the Australian Health Research Alliance). AHRA members include all NHMRC accredited Australian Research Translation Centres. This has provided Western Alliance with access to a wealth of opportunities for collaboration and sharing of expertise, as well as access to further funding opportunities.

We are extremely proud to represent Western Victoria in working towards better health through translational research and look forward to working with our peers across Australia as we prepare for full NHMRC accreditation over the coming year.

Membership of AHRA has enabled Western Alliance and its members to participate in significant AHRA coordinated research translation projects. Western Alliance is currently participating in a Medical Research Future Fund funded Consumer and Community Involvement project by extending the consultative process into western Victoria.

Membership of AHRA has also enabled participation in AHRA's national collaborative programs including the Women's Health Research Translation and Impact Network, the Consumer and Community Involvement Initiative, the Indigenous Research Network (OCHRe - Our Collaborations in Health Research), and the Data Driven Healthcare Improvement Initiative.





## Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative (VRTCC)



In early 2020 the three Victorian Research Translation Centres, the Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH), Monash Partners and Western Alliance, formed a collaborative to produce and translate evidence to improve the health of Victorians – The Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative (VRTCC). Over 95% of health and medical research in Victoria is conducted by the members of these centres, and the role of the Collaborative is to embed research into healthcare.

VRTCC drives several key programs including:

- **The VRTCC Victorian Falls Prevention Alliance**, which was established in November 2021 and includes representation from consumers, clinicians, researchers, managers and policy makers across Victoria. The purpose of the Falls Prevention Alliance is to work collaboratively to reduce falls and injuries from falls in hospitals. Each year the Alliance holds a workshop addressing a

key focus area in falls prevention. Each workshop provides an opportunity to meet experts and share experiences, as well as providing clinicians with practical tips to reduce falls in their location of practice.

- **The Australian Clinical Trials Education Centre (A-CTEC)**, formerly the Victorian Clinical Trials Education Centre. A-CTEC is a not-for-profit, member-based education centre that has made learning resources for clinical trials accessible to more than 8000 researchers in health service settings across Australia. The A-CTEC Steering Committee is chaired by Western Alliance.
- **The Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Working Group**, which is undertaking a Victoria-wide review of research ethics and governance procedures including a specific focus on issues facing rural and regional health services.

## National Ageing Research Institute (NARI)



Western Alliance and NARI, through the Melbourne Ageing Research Collaboration (MARC), have been jointly supporting and funding research since 2019.

In addition to partnering on research training initiatives, this year we have co-funded a rural ageing focussed project based in Ararat: The SWELL-RAC (Supporting the wellbeing of staff caring for residents with challenging behaviours in residential aged care) project. SWELL-RAC is currently working with residential aged care staff to develop new workforce wellbeing initiatives. This project intersects with our priority theme of Mental Health and is set to have a positive impact in the Grampians region.



## SECTION 3 Our Activities

### Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) GENV



In 2021, MCRI commenced 'GenV', a large-scale project across Victoria centred on parallel birth and parent cohorts. Through representation on the GenV National Strategic Partnerships Advisory Committee, Western Alliance is actively supporting this program across western Victoria.

Through the GenV program, MCRI are also partnering on the Western Alliance Flagship Research Program - 'The Pregnancy Research and Translation Ecosystem

(PRT-E)', led by Professor Peter Vuillermin. We look forward to continuing the progress of GenV over the coming years and to working collaboratively with MCRI to improve child and parent health for our communities.

Western Alliance also recently accepted an invitation from MCRI to become a financial partner to develop a submission to the Victoria Government to establish a Collaborative Centre for Infant and Child Mental Health and Wellbeing.

### Victorian Department of Health



Western Alliance has participated in a research translation partnership with the Victorian government since 2019. The partnership has included the provision of strategic advice as well as funding for projects that address the strategic needs of both the government and Western Alliance member organisations.

Our partnership with the Victorian Department of Health continues to provide crucial support for the Research Translation Coordinator program, and this year our partnership has also facilitated a PhD Fellowship program with our member Universities.

The PhD Fellowship program enables health practitioners to undertake PhD study on a Department priority topic, by allocating funds to supplement a university PhD scholarship to enable the recipient to continue their professional work while undertaking their PhD.

Western Alliance was allocated two Fellowships (\$138,000 in total) this year, with participants to be enrolled in PhD programs via Western Alliance members Deakin University and Federation University.





## Supporting First Nations Led Research

Western Alliance recognises the importance of demonstrating cultural humility and agility as an organisation, whereby it is responsive to the needs of the Communities it serves, and privileges Aboriginal leadership, recognising Community strength and amplifying their voice, ensuring that its processes and language reflect a strengths-based approach.

During 2023/24 we undertook the following exciting projects and actions:

Following the launch of marra ngarrgoo, marra goorri: The Victorian Aboriginal Health, Medical and Wellbeing Research Accord, in late 2023 all Western Alliance funded grant applications for 2024 and beyond are required to demonstrate how proposed projects are informed by and address the specific health needs of western Victoria's Aboriginal communities and uphold the principles of marra ngarrgoo, marra goorri.



A/Professor  
Nicole Mercer

**A/Professor Nicole Mercer** was appointed to the Western Alliance board. A/Professor Mercer is a Wadawurrung Woman, with ties to Wurundjeri Nation, and has worked in acute and community public health settings and in Aboriginal health for over 25 years as a Registered Nurse. Her role on the Board is to provide strategic advice and oversee the implementation of research translation strategies to advance the health of the Aboriginal Community in western Victoria.

We have been accepted as a member of the **Lowitja Institute**, Australia's only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health research institute, and look forward to continuing our efforts through this membership to advance Aboriginal led research in our region.

Western Alliance has committed to champion and work with the **Western District Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisation (ACCO) Collective (WDAC)**, which includes western Victoria's eight ACCOs and represents 28% of Victoria's Aboriginal people, the largest Aboriginal population in regional Victoria. As a first step towards working with WDAC, Western Alliance is funding a collaborative research initiative led by WDAC, in partnership with Alliance members Deakin Rural Health and Grampians Health under the Centre for Australian Research into Access (CARA).

Western Alliance has supported or participated in additional regional, state and national programs and initiatives including:

- Involvement of Deakin University's National Indigenous Knowledges Education Research and Innovation (NIKERI) in mentoring and teaching into the STaRR Program)
- Supporting development of an Aboriginal consumer and community involvement network
- VACCHO (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation)
- OCHRe: Our Collaborations in Health Research



## SECTION 3

## Our Activities

Each of our activities align with our four strategic objectives across our research priorities:



### Objective: Enabling Environment

#### Annual Symposium, Warrnambool

The 2023 Western Alliance Symposium, held in Warrnambool, provided a wonderful opportunity to reconnect with colleagues and forge new collaborations, while showcasing some of the outstanding research across western Victoria. A total of 115 attendees enjoyed hearing 4 keynote presentations from leaders in regional and rural health and research, as well as 40 presentations from senior and emerging regional researchers.



# 2023 symposium WARRNAMBOOL



## Consumer and Community Involvement



**Marilyn Dolling**



**Katherine Stanley**



**Sarah Healy**

Western Alliance recognises the importance of ensuring that consumers and the community have opportunities to be involved in the design and implementation of health research. During 2023/24 we instituted a process of appointing key people and establishing programs to facilitate meaningful consumer and community involvement across our region. These activities include:

- Appointment of **Mrs Marilyn Dolling** as a Consumer Representative on our Research Translation Committee. Marilyn provides a lived experience consumer and carer perspective in the co-development of Western Alliance initiatives.
- Appointment of **Ms Katherine Stanley** as a Consumer Representative on the Western Alliance board. Katherine has a lived experience of endometriosis and is the director of Endo Help Foundation which advocates for investment and improvements in women's health and raises money to support research into pelvic pain. Katherine's role on the Board is to provide a consumer voice and perspective for Board discussions and decisions, and to provide guidance on how best to support consumers to be involved in research and translation.
- Appointment of **Ms Sarah Healy** as the inaugural McIntosh Community and Research Network (CARN) Engagement Officer, co-developed and co-funded by Western Alliance and the McIntosh family in response to the passing of Mr Mishka McIntosh, whose passion for community engagement and recognition of the importance of

lived experience will continue through this role. The role has been created with the goals of continuing to develop CARN, and growing a network of researchers, consumers and others with an interest in the benefit of a lived experience voice in research and research design.

- Western Alliance collaboration with and co-funding of **CARN**, the main grouping for consumer and community involvement in research in western Victoria. Western Alliance has established and continues to fund a Lived Experience Coordinator position which oversees this network.
- Developing a program of **consumer review of applications for research funding**, including identifying appropriate consumers via the CARN network, providing training, support and debriefing for the consumer, and remunerating the consumer for their time. The goals of this program are to ensure that consumers participate in decisions on what research and translation projects Western Alliance supports, and to provide consumer feedback and advice to applicants to strengthen the consumer and community involvement in their research projects.
- Improving carer involvement in research and translation activity across western Victoria, through becoming a financial partner in the newly created **Deakin University 'Carer Hub'** as part of the Centre of Excellence in Cancer Carer Research. Western Alliance will be represented on the Advisory Committee for the Hub.



## SECTION 3 Our Activities

### Research Translation Coordinators



**Dr Jessie Adams**  
*South West  
region*



**Dr Michael Field**  
*Geelong & Colac  
region*



**Dr Ella Ottrey**  
*Grampians &  
Maryborough region*



**Alesha Sayner**  
*Grampians  
region*

Our Research Translation Coordinators, Dr Ella Ottrey, Dr Michael Field, Dr Jessie Adams, and Alesha Sayner, have established themselves as an integral component of research capability building in western Victoria.

Commencing in early 2019, the positions, which are funded by Western Alliance with the generous support of the Victorian State Government, are embedded in

Western Alliance member health services to provide 'boots on the ground' support for research development and translation.

This year our Research Translation Coordinators were instrumental in supporting and enabling many research and translation initiatives across the region, and led or supported 'Research Day' events across our member health services.



## Showcasing research and supporting strategy development

Western Alliance supported the development and delivery of successful 'Research Day' events at South West Healthcare, Western District Health Service and Colac Area Health, and development of strategic research plans across multiple health services and the Primary Health Network.



*Colac Area Health and Western District Health Service Research Day events*

## Biostatistics Support

Building on our biostatistics support program which has seen funded access to a biostatistician for our health service and PHN member employees, Western Alliance continued to fund a dedicated biostatistician during 2023/24 in collaboration with the Deakin Biostatistics Unit.



**Charlotte Molesworth**  
*Consultant Biostatistician*

## VRREGN - Victorian Rural/Regional Ethics & Governance Network

VRREGN is a network of ethics and governance representatives from across rural and regional Victoria convened by Western Alliance to identify common issues and improve ethics and governance processes and resources.

Work in 2023/2024 focused on streamlining and consolidating templates and other resources, and improving the process for ethical review of quality improvement projects.



Each of our activities align with our four strategic objectives across our research priorities:



## Objective: Capacity & Capability Building

### STaRR (Supporting Translation of Research in Rural and Regional Settings)

STaRR has had its most successful year, training and supporting more emerging researchers and research mentors to enhance research capacity in our member organisations.

#### STaRR Emerging Researcher Training

A huge congratulations to our 2023 - 2024 STaRR Emerging Researcher cohort who completed their training. We are heartened by the engagement and enthusiasm of our emerging researchers and will continue to support and watch them with great interest. We would like to thank our fabulous STaRR mentors, workshop presenters, and facilitators for their invaluable contributions to and support for the STaRR program.

During 2023/24 the STaRR program enabled:

- 30 Emerging Researchers to complete the three STaRR workshops;
- 6 STaRR Emerging Researchers to present at the STaRR Showcase at the Western Alliance Symposium;
- 6 STaRR Emerging Researcher Grants to be awarded – 3 seed grants and 3 translation grants;
- 41 members of the STaRR Mentor Network to support STaRR emerging researchers; and
- 14 STaRR Emerging Researchers to participate in our inaugural Implementation Science workshops.

#### STaRR Emerging Researcher Showcase

The annual STaRR Emerging Researcher Showcase was held during the Western Alliance Symposium in November 2023. The audience was impressed with the excellent presentations delivered by five emerging researchers on their findings and learnings to date. We are thrilled that this event was once again a crowd favourite during the symposium, and we look forward to running it again in years to come.

#### STaRR Mentor Network



**Dr Olivia King**  
*Research Capability  
Building Program  
Manager*



**Peter Kelly**  
*Consumer & Community  
Involvement Lead/ Research  
Capability Building Program Officer*

Mentoring is a fundamental part of the STaRR Emerging Researcher training program. Our STaRR Mentor Network comprises over 40 health service and academic researchers who volunteer their time to provide one-on-one support and guidance to a STaRR Emerging Researcher as they participate in the 10-week training program.

Our mentors are mainly from western Victoria, with a small number from metropolitan Melbourne and other locations, who have an interest in rural health or connections to the STaRR program.



## HDR (Higher Degree by Research) Fellowships

This exciting initiative provides fellowships of \$45,000 to minimise barriers to health professionals undertaking health sector embedded HDR studies whilst continuing professional practice.



Congratulations to the 2023/24 Fellowship recipients:



- Cara Hill (pictured, left), who will complete her PhD with Deakin University on best-practice meal-related dysphagia interventions to improve mealtime-related quality of life for people living with dysphagia in rural and regional aged care facilities in western Victoria. Cara works as a speech

pathologist and as a research assistant. Her PhD program will be based at Grampians Health and will complement the work she will lead supported by a Western Alliance Rapid Applied Research Translation Grant.



- Michael Pang (pictured, right), a senior clinician physiotherapist from Grampians Health, will complete his PhD with Federation University investigating whether continuing professional development positively influences allied health workforce retention in regional and rural Victoria.

## A-CTEC Australian Clinical Trial Education Centre

A-CTEC now provides free access to clinical trials training for over 300 staff from Western Alliance member organisations and 8000 people across Australia, and is supported by funding from all state and territory governments.

The A-CTEC Conference was held in May 2024, and featured two days of thought-provoking presentations and panel discussions with industry professionals and expert speakers on the theme "Better Together."





## SECTION 3

## Our Activities

Each of our activities align with our four strategic objectives across our research priorities:



### Objective: Funding, Support and Acceleration

#### Rapid Applied Research Translation Grants



The Rapid Applied Research Translation Grants program focuses on supporting the translation of existing research and evidence into policy and practice, through implementation and/or scaling within health settings. A total of \$100,000 (up to \$40,000 per project) was allocated in the first iteration of this program during 2023/24.

Congratulations to the 2023/24 grant recipients:



- Principal Investigator: **Dr Greg Weeks**, Barwon Health, South West Healthcare, Grampians Health, Deakin Rural Health: Establishment and evaluation of a perioperative medicines management service at regional hospital sites in Western Victoria. Funded amount: \$37,200



- Principal Investigator: **Cara Hill**, Grampians Health, Colac Area Health, Deakin Rural Health: Translating research into practice: improving texture modification systems in Residential Aged Care Facilities (RACFs) in rural and regional Western Victoria. Funded amount: \$29,387



- Principal Investigator: **Dr Nic Brayshaw**, Western Victoria Primary Health Network, Deakin University: Developing a roadmap for the implementation of shared medical appointments in general practice. Funded amount: \$33,413



## STaRR Emerging Researcher Seed Grants

During 2023/24 Western Alliance offered past STaRR participants an opportunity to apply for Emerging Researcher Seed Grants of up to \$5,000 to conduct a research project to generate new evidence.

Congratulations to the 2023/24 grant recipients:



- **April Chiu**, Physiotherapist, Barwon Health: Barriers and Enablers to Prehabilitation prior to Breast Cancer Surgery in a Regional Health Service. Funded amount: \$5,000



- **Maree Fraser**, Registered Nurse and Clinical Governance Coordinator (Aged Care), East Grampians Health Service: A community-based strategy to increase the completion of Advance Care Directives in a local medical practice. Funded amount: \$5,000



- **Jessica Wynn**, Urology Registrar, Barwon Health: Why patients have chosen Botox injections as their preferred treatment for overactive bladder symptoms. Funded amount: \$4,800

## STaRR Emerging Researcher Translation Grants

Past STaRR participants were also offered an opportunity to apply for Emerging Researcher Translation grants of up to \$10,000 that aim to translate research evidence into practice.

Congratulations to the 2023/24 grant recipients:



- **Nicole O'Shea**, Pharmacist, Grampians Health: Weighing Liquid Drugs of Dependence to Manage Unaccounted Losses: A Pharmacy Initiative in a Large Regional Health Service. Funded amount: \$9,575



- **Jake Romein**, Exercise Physiologist, East Grampians Health Service: Developing a toolkit to support the scaling of a modified sport program for older adults in rural areas. Funded amount: \$5,000



- **Rhiannon Beggs** and **Cara Hill**, Speech Pathologists, Barwon Health: Improving the provision of prescribed food, fluid, and mealtime supervisions requirements in inpatient aged care settings. Funded amount: \$9,990



## SECTION 3 Our Activities

### Support for Major External Research Grants

During 2023/24 Western Alliance continued its successful program supporting applicants of major external grant opportunities, where the objectives of the proposed project align with those of Western Alliance and its member organisations.

We are pleased to report that four projects supported by Western Alliance were successful in external grant rounds during 2023/24. These projects were each allocated \$20,000 and collectively attracted \$9.55M in external competitive research grant income.

Chief Investigator (discipline)	Chief Investigator (discipline) Western Alliance health service/ PHN member involvement	Project Title	Amount contributed by Western Alliance	Amount Received in External project funding (funding body)
A/Prof Nicole Kiss (Nutrition and Dietetics) 	Deakin University, Colac Area Health, and Grampians Health	Revolutionising sarcopenia care for people living with cancer: Establishing effective screening and referral pathways into evidence-based treatment in rural and specialist cancer services	\$20,000	\$1,500,000 (MRFF)
A/Prof Anna Ugalde (Behavioural Science) 	Deakin University, Colac Area Health, East Grampians Health Service, Grampians Health, South West Healthcare, and Western District Health Service	Driving equitable cancer outcomes across Australia: Establishing a nationally scalable model to embed best practice cancer care into rural health services	\$20,000	\$4,900,000 (MRFF)
Prof Trish Livingstone (Cancer care) 	Deakin University, All Western Alliance member health services, and PHN	Establishing a Centre of Excellence in Cancer Carer Research	\$20,000	\$1,200,000 (Victorian State Government)
Prof Alison Kennedy (Farmer Health)  	Deakin University, Western Victoria PHN, Barwon Health and Western District Health Service	A Whole of Community Systems Approach to Co-Designing and Implementing a Safe Spaces Model of Primary Healthcare for Sexuality Diverse Young People in Western Victoria	\$20,000	\$1,950,000 (MRFF)



## A Western Alliance success story: Cara Hill



### 2019

As a junior Speech pathologist at Colac Area Health Cara participated in the 2019 Allied Health Research Training Program (pre-STaRR), supported by Western Alliance, and pitched an idea to reduce adverse incidents in aged care due to incorrect food and fluid texture prescription

### 2020 - 2021

Cara conducted the research at Colac Area Health, supported by Dr Laura Alston (Western Alliance Research Fellow) and Dr Michael Field (Western Alliance Research Translation Coordinator). Based on the research, health service policy was changed and prescription accuracy improved significantly.

### 2021 - 2022

Cara completed the STaRR program to further her research skills and set up longer term evaluation and improvement of the research at Colac Area Health, as well as commencing similar work at Barwon Health and Grampians Health.

### 2022 - 2023

Across 2022 and 2023, Cara received two Western Alliance grants (Emerging Researcher Grant and a Translation Grant) and a PhD scholarship, which will see her scaling the work across other Western Alliance Health Services.





## SECTION 4 Future Directions

*During 2023/24 Western Alliance leveraged member contributions to significantly enhance access to research and translation funding for our member organisations. We have established an ecosystem for achieving improvements in health policy and practice across western Victoria based on our research priorities, and will continue to build on this in future years.*

High priority future activities will include:

- working towards full NHMRC accreditation as a Research Translation Centre;
- growing our Consumer and Community Involvement program;
- continuing to strengthen partnerships with Aboriginal Community and advance Aboriginal - led research translation and capability building;
- further expanding our STaRR Program to target health professionals at different stages of their research journey;
- further strengthening the connections between quality improvement and research across the region; and
- building on our strong existing partnerships with other research translation centres, the state government, MCRI and NARI, and exploring new partnerships across Victoria and Australia.









# Acknowledgements

## *Thank you*

Thank you to our members and supporters, including members of the Western Alliance Board and Research Translation Committee, for your ongoing support and commitment to improving health outcomes in regional and rural Victoria. We have had a rewarding and productive year, and we very much appreciate your continued dedication.

We would also like to thank our partners and collaborators, including the Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH), Monash Partners, Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) National Ageing Research Institute (NARI), Victorian Department of Health (DH) and Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR).

## Contact Us

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