

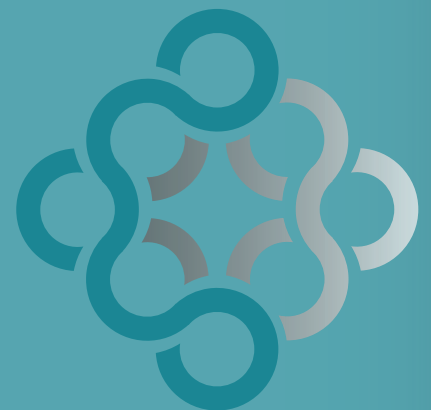


Western
Alliance

Academic Health Science Centre

2025-2026 ANNUAL REPORT

Western Alliance Health Research Ltd
(Western Alliance)



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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.

2025-26 HIGHLIGHTS

- ❖ Western Alliance was successful in its application to the 2025-26 NHMRC Supporting Research Translation Centres Grant Opportunity, which has provided funds to support the expansion and development of activities in First Nations-led research and Consumer and Community involvement in research.
- ❖ STaRRlite workshops and the STaRR Mentored Research Training Program equipped another 130 local emerging researchers with foundational skills and practical experience in translational research.
- ❖ Western Alliance funded 12 high-quality research translation projects worth over \$184,000 and provided funding and in-kind support to three projects which have attracted over \$9.48 million in external funding.
- ❖ Western Alliance welcomed over 200 delegates to its 2025 Symposium in Ballarat, which featured 50 regional and 8 keynote presentations
- ❖ The DELIVER Program launched its randomised stepped-wedge trial of a region-wide, nurse-led telehealth Residential In Reach model to generate real-world evidence to support sustainable service integration in rural and regional settings.



An overview of Western Alliance

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.

Western Alliance is accredited as a Research Translation Centre by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) in recognition of its expertise in translating health and medical research into improved health care in regional and rural areas.

Western Alliance is comprised of 11 member organisations located across the Barwon, South West 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.



Our Members

Western Alliance's 11 member organisations comprise two major regional city-based health services: Barwon Health and Grampians Health; six regional and rural health services: Colac Area Health, East Grampians Health Service, Maryborough District Health Service, Portland District Health, South West Healthcare and Western District Health Service; and two regionally based academic institutions: Deakin and Federation Universities.

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



Our Strategic Objectives

The Western Alliance Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026 was developed through extensive consultation with member organisations. 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

Western Alliance research priorities were developed with input from Western Alliance member health services, the Western Victoria Primary Health Network (PHN), Board members and members of the Research Translation Committee, including consumers with lived experience.



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 96 research translation projects in alignment with its identified research priorities. The Alliance has contributed \$3.36 million to these studies, which have attracted \$44.25 million in external funding. These include:



Chronic and complex care (including cancer)

22 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$649,620 External funding: \$15,498,000



Digital health, telehealth and home-based care

5 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$139,248



First Nations health

4 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$239,734 External funding: \$75,000



Mental health

9 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$287,693 External funding: \$1,950,000



Primary care and prevention of admission to hospital

17 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$613,747 External funding: \$2,746,361



Women's and children's health and wellbeing

18 projects, Western Alliance funding: \$826,376 External funding: \$14,863,000



Health workforce wellbeing and sustainability

14 Projects, Western Alliance funding \$337,959 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



Western Alliance Governance

Organisational 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, Mr Drew Aras. Ms Sarah Shaw, Western Alliance Executive Officer, is registered as the Alliance's Company Secretary and Mr Dale Fraser, CEO Grampians Health, is the Alliance's Treasurer.

Board of Management

Western Alliance is governed by a Board of Management. The Board is comprised of the CEOs (or representatives) of each member organisation along with three Directors who have been appointed based on their skills or background, including First Nations and consumer representatives. The Board meets bi-monthly at which time it receives research and financial reports, including long-term (three year) financial projections to monitor sustainability and progress.

DELIVER Program Governance Sub-committee

The DELIVER research program is supported by a Commonwealth funded MRFF Rapid Applied Research Translation Grant, administered by Western Alliance, in partnership with Alliance members (Barwon Health, Colac Area Health, East Grampians Health Service, Grampians Health, South West Healthcare, Western District Health Service, Western Victoria Primary Health Network, Deakin University, Federation University) and project partners Monash University and The University of Melbourne.

The DELIVER Sub-committee of the Western Alliance Board provides governance oversight for the DELIVER Project. An external DELIVER Advisory Group that includes representation from local, state and national bodies provides expertise to guide and inform Program activity.

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 health professionals, managers and research representatives from Western Alliance member organisations as well as a First Nations representative and two consumer representatives.

Our People

Western Alliance Board

Name	Organisation
Professor Brendan Crotty (Chair)	Independent
Mr Dale Fraser (Treasurer)	Grampians Health
Ms Nickola Allan	Maryborough District Health Service
Mr Drew Aras	Western Alliance (from October 2025)
Dr Jaclyn Bishop	East Grampians Health Service
Ms Fiona Brew	Colac Area Health
Ms Rowena Clift	Western District Health Service
Dr Kate McConnon	South West Healthcare (until November 2025)
Professor Rachel Huxley	Deakin University
A/Professor Nicole Mercer	First Nations Representative, Deakin University
Professor Warren Payne	Western Alliance (until October 2025)
Dr Miranda Sollychin	South West Healthcare (from November 2025)
Ms Katherine Stanley	Consumer Representative
Professor Shane Thomas	Federation University
Dr Ajai Verma	Barwon Health
Mr Craig Wilding	Western Victoria Primary Health Network

DELIVER Program Governance Sub-committee

Name	Organisation
Professor Brendan Crotty (Chair)	Independent
Mr Dale Fraser	Grampians Health
Professor Rachel Huxley	Deakin University

Research Translation Committee

Name	Organisation
A/Professor Anna Wong Shee (Chair)	Grampians Health
Ms Jessie Adams	Western District Health Service/ South West Healthcare/ Western Alliance
Professor Steven Allender	Deakin University
Dr Laura Alston	Colac Area Health
Mr Drew Aras	Western Alliance
Dr Jaclyn Bishop	East Grampians Health Service
Professor Susan Brumby	National Centre for Farmer Health
Ms Alison Buccheri	Colac Area Health/Western Alliance (from March 2026)
Ms Ashleigh Clarke	Grampians Health
Ms Leah Damman	South West Healthcare
Mrs Marilyn Dolling	Consumer Representative
Dr Michael Field	Colac Area Health/ Barwon Health/ Western Alliance
Ms Jessica Franks	Deakin University/ Western Alliance (from June 2026)
Mr Andrew Giddy	Western Victoria Primary Health Network
Ms Erica Grundell	Barwon Health
A/Professor Kate Huggins	Deakin University
Professor Alison Hutchinson	Deakin University/ Barwon Health
Mr Peter Kelly	Western Alliance (until November 2025)
Dr Olivia King	Western Alliance/ Barwon Health
Ms Tess Marotta	Consumer Representative
Dr Ella Ottrey	East Grampians Health Service/ Maryborough District Health Service/ Western Alliance
Ms Jessica Payne	Grampians Health/ Western Alliance (from March 2026)
Professor Aziz Rahman	Federation University
Ms Alesha Sayner	Grampians Health/ Western Alliance
Ms Sarah Shaw	Western Alliance
Ms Stephanie Thow	Deakin University/ Western Alliance (from June 2026)
Professor Vincent Versace	Deakin Rural Health
Professor Peter Vuillermin	Barwon Health (until September 2025)
Ms Sue Williams	Grampians Health
Dr Emma West	Deakin University

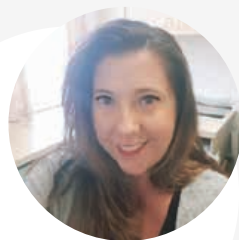
Our Employees and Funded Positions



Drew Aras
Executive Director



Sarah Shaw
Executive Officer



Cassandra Hamilton
Administrative Officer



Dr Olivia King
Research Capability
Building Manager



Dr Michael Field
Research Translation
Coordinator -
Barwon/Colac
(to February 2026)



Alison Bucchini
Research Translation
Coordinator - Colac
(from February 2026) and
STaRR Program Coordinator



Dr Jessie Adams
Research Translation
Coordinator - South West



Dr Ella Ottrey
Research Translation
Coordinator - East
Grampians & Maryborough
(to May 2026) and Research
Fellow (from May 2026)



Alesha Sayner
Research Translation
Coordinator - Grampians



Jessica Payne
Research Assistant,
Western Alliance/
Grampians Health



Jess Franks
Lead, Co-design and
Engagement, Western Alliance/
Health Voices Victoria



Steph Thow
Manager, First Nations
Engagement, Western
Alliance/ Health Voices Victoria



Peter Kelly
Consumer & Community
Involvement Lead/ Research
Capability Building Program
Officer (to December 2025)



Charlotte Molesworth
Biostatistician

Chairperson's Report



The 2025-26 year got off to a positive start with the news that Western Alliance was successful in its application to the 2025-26 NHMRC Supporting Research Translation Centres Grant Opportunity. This grant is now supporting the expansion and development of activities in First Nations-led research and Consumer and Community involvement in research across western Victoria. These activities include the commencement of new roles that aim to build First Nations research capability and strengthen engagement with First Nations Community, alongside the development of a dedicated Consumer and Community Involvement in Research Hub for our region.

While we are excited to see the establishment and growth of these priority areas, Western Alliance's core activities continued to flourish in 2025-26. Highlights include:

- STaRRlite workshops and the STaRR Mentored Research Training Program equipping another 130 local emerging researchers with foundational skills and practical experience in translational research.
- Western Alliance funded 12 high-quality research translation projects worth over \$184,000 and provided funding and in-kind support to three projects which have attracted over \$9.48 million in external funding.
- Western Alliance welcoming over 200 delegates to its 2025 Symposium in Ballarat, which featured 50 regional and 8 keynote presentations
- The DELIVER Program launching a randomised stepped-wedge trial of a region-wide, nurse-led telehealth Residential In Reach model to generate real-world evidence to support sustainable service integration in rural and regional settings.

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 Remco Pollman who stepped down during the year, and welcome new Board member Miranda Sollychin and returning member Shane Thomas.

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

2025-26 Activity Reports

All Western Alliance activities align with its four strategic objectives across identified research priorities:

Objective

Creating an enabling environment for translational research and research translation



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

Translational research projects

DELIVER continues to support a portfolio of translational research projects in partnership with health services, Western Alliance, Western Victoria PHN, and university partners Deakin University, Federation University, Monash University, and the University of Melbourne.

Region-wide initiatives include understanding patient preferences for Hospital in the Home through a discrete choice experiment and developing implementation guidance for AI Scribes in rural and regional health services.

DELIVER also supports locally led projects, including evaluation of Barwon Health's Connected Care model; co-design of a community outreach service with Western District Health Service; evaluation of remote patient monitoring with South West Healthcare and Barwon Health; exploring how older adults access information about health services in regional Victoria with Colac Area Health; and Just Cos, an evidence-based approach to quality improvement with East Grampians Health Service. Collectively, these projects are strengthening the evidence base for improving healthcare delivery across rural and regional Victoria.

Research capability development

Research capacity and capability development also remains a core focus of DELIVER. Since the commencement of the DELIVER program, 'Supporting Translation of Research in Rural and Regional Health Services' (STaRR) has been expanded in multiple different ways to better meet the capability building needs of our emerging researchers, mentors and leaders.

Complementing STaRR, DELIVER has built research capability at the local level through place-based research teams that use systems thinking and learning health system approaches to identify, develop and test locally relevant solutions to health service challenges. These teams, comprising a dedicated DELIVER-funded Research Assistant, a Research Translation Coordinator, health service leaders and academic-researchers, create sustainable capability for evidence-informed service improvement and research translation within participating health services.

Combined, this suite of programs continues to strengthen the region's ability to undertake, apply and translate research that improves health service delivery and patient outcomes.

What's next for DELIVER?

As DELIVER progresses towards its formal conclusion in Spring 2027, a key focus will be establishing enduring research and translation capabilities within health services, ensuring the partnerships, skills and approaches that have been developed continue to drive evidence-informed innovation and improvement beyond the life of the program.

The local solution development phase of DELIVER will continue through to Autumn 2027, culminating in a program showcase that will provide an important opportunity to celebrate and share achievements across participating health services. The showcase will also mark the beginning of a broader dissemination and scale-up phase, supporting the spread of successful approaches and the translation of program learnings across the region.

Objective

Stronger partnerships and collaborations for translational research and research translation



We would like to acknowledge and thank our partners across health services, community and academic institutions for their ongoing engagement, enthusiasm and commitment to the program.



Professor Vin Versace
DELIVER Chief Investigator



A/Professor Kate Huggins
DELIVER Program Manager

DELIVER in action: Evaluating a new Residential in-Reach service in the Grampians region

Older adults living in residential aged care across the Grampians region were experiencing high rates of avoidable emergency presentations, fragmented transitions of care, and limited access to timely clinical support. At the same time, services were largely operating independently, without a coordinated regional approach to supporting aged care homes.

To address this challenge, an unprecedented partnership was established between the Grampians Local Health Service Network (GLHSN), Grampians Health Residential In Reach, public and private residential aged care providers, Western Victoria Primary Health Network, Western Alliance and the DELIVER research program. Together, partners co-designed a region-wide, nurse-led telehealth Residential In Reach model that provides timely clinical assessment, advice, and escalation support directly to aged care homes.

Implementation of the model is being led by GLHSN and Grampians Health, with partners working collectively to address longstanding system challenges including

avoidable emergency department and urgent care presentations, prolonged hospital stays, and delays in accessing clinical support.

Concurrently, Monash and Deakin University researchers are evaluating its effectiveness and cost-effectiveness through a randomised stepped-wedge trial, generating real-world evidence to support sustainable service integration in rural and regional settings. The active trial phase concluded in June 2026, with data analysis underway.

The trial was publicly launched in September 2025, celebrating the collaboration between health services, researchers and aged care providers, and their shared commitment to improving outcomes through innovation and evidence-based care. The Honourable Sam Rae, Federal Minister for Aged Care and Seniors, and the Honourable Catherine King, MP for Ballarat attended the launch. Minister Rae highlighted the critical role of research in informing evidence-based policy and decision-making.



Jade Odgers - Manager, Clinical Innovation and Development, Grampians Health, **Narelle Ryan** - Senior Project Lead Residential in Reach Redesign project, Grampians Local Health Service Network, **Dale Fraser** - CEO, Grampians Health, **Drew Aras** - Executive Director, Western Alliance, **Kate Huggins** - DELIVER Program Director, **Terrance Haines** - Head of School Primary and Allied Health Care, Monash University, **Ingrid Tudas** - Registered Nurse and Care Community Manager, Kurrajong Lodge Aged Care, Grampians Health Horsham **Sue Leibling** - Nurse Manager, Residential in Reach Grampians Health **David** - Resident, Aged Care Community, Grampians Health Ballarat, **Hon Sam Rae MP** - Minister for Aged Care and Seniors, **Hon Catherine King MP** - Member for Ballarat, Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government



Australian Health Research Alliance (AHRA)

The Australian Health Research Alliance (AHRA) is the voice of 12 National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) accredited Research Translation Centres and 2 Emerging Research Translation Centres across Australia. AHRA's members encompass more than 90% of researchers and 86% of acute health care services across Australia and collectively seeks to accelerate the pace and scale of research translation into health care and community health.

With Drew Aras in the roles of Deputy Chair of AHRA and Chair of the AHRA Rural, Regional, Remote Subcommittee, in 2025-26 Western Alliance was heavily involved in shaping the National Health and Medical Research Strategy, which strongly advocates for rural and regional health research and research translation. Western Alliance was also heavily involved in the development of the NHMRC Research

Translation Strategy and the NHMRC/CHF Consumer & Community Involvement in Research Statement. Through AHRA, Western Alliance will now play a key leadership role in the implementation of these important national strategies.

Professor Steve Wesselingh, Chief Executive Officer, NHMRC with AHRA Chair Professor Carol Hodgson, Executive Director, Monash Partners and AHRA Deputy Chairs Drew Aras, Executive Director, Western Alliance and Tom Symonds, Executive Director, Health Translation SA.



Objective

Stronger partnerships and collaborations for translational research and research translation



Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative (VRTCC)



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

In 2025-26, key VRTCC initiatives included:

- **The Victorian Falls Prevention Alliance, an alliance of consumers, clinicians, researchers, managers and policy makers across Victoria working collaboratively to reduce falls and injuries from falls in hospitals.** The Victorian Falls Prevention Alliance Annual Symposium in May 2026 provided over 300 clinicians, researchers, consumers and health leaders an opportunity to connect and share experiences, as well as providing clinicians with practical tips to reduce falls in their clinical practice. This included a keynote address by Professor Danielle Bouchard, University of Manitoba, Canada, focused on falls and exercise.
- **The second Bridging Research and Quality in Healthcare Summit, established in response to a recommendation of the Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Working Group to develop a system-wide approach to improving ethics and governance processes for low-risk research and quality activities.** The second summit was held in February 2026 and included over 100 participants from research and quality units across Victorian health organisations and universities.
- **The Aboriginal Health Showcase, held in March 2026 with over 650 people attending across the two days (in person and online).** This event showcased First Nations-led research and innovation projects across Victoria and highlighted the challenges and opportunities for advancing First Nations-led and co-designed research in the future.





National Ageing Research Institute (NARI)



Melbourne
Ageing Research
Collaboration

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

2025-26 saw the completion of a rural ageing-focused project based at East Grampians Health Service in Ararat, initially co-funded by Western Alliance and MARC. Phase 2 of the SWELL-RAC (Supporting the wellbeing of staff caring for residents with challenging behaviours in residential aged care) project focused on implementation of key workforce wellbeing strategies, with a particular emphasis on peer support and debriefing programs.

The evaluation indicated that a peer support program in rural aged care facilities can have a positive impact on staff wellbeing and resulted in negligible additional burden on staff and health service resources, making it an affordable and sustainable wellbeing strategy. The initiative has scope for broader adoption or adaptation in other health services and aged care facilities.

Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI)



The MCRI leads '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 is also partnering on the Western Alliance Flagship Research Program, 'The Pregnancy Research and Translation Ecosystem (PRT-E)', led by Professor Peter Vuillermin. PRT-E has now led to three further projects funded by the NHMRC and MRFF, bringing in a total of just under \$4M to the region for this important research translation work:

- **The effect of a gut-focused dietary smartphone**
- **An app for pregnant women on infant mental health-related outcomes:** Beyond Bugs and Bumps RCT (Randomised Controlled Trial)
- **A midwife-delivered prenatal dietary intervention** to prevent perinatal depression and child neurocognitive vulnerability in regional and rural communities

Western Alliance is also a financial partner with MCRI in the development of a submission to the Victoria Government to establish a Collaborative Centre for Infant and Child Mental Health and Wellbeing.



Victorian State Government (Department of Health (DoH) and Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (DJSIR))



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 DJSIR continues to provide crucial support for the Western Alliance Research Translation Coordinator program. The partnership with DoH has led to the Translational Research PhD Fellowship Program, a joint initiative with the three Victorian Research Translation Centres and the department, in which two scholarships were awarded via Western Alliance University partners:

- **Lochie Timms McLean** – ‘Interventions to reduce gambling harm in ADHD and autistic Adults’ (Federation University, in partnership with Safer Care Victoria and The Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health)
- **Carina Mammone** – Promoting childhood mental wellbeing through community engagement in the context of climate change (Deakin University, in partnership with DoH)

Drew Aras represented rural and regional Victoria region as a member of the (DJSIR) convened Expert Reference Group on Health and Medical Research Workforce, aligned with the Research Workforce pillar of the Health and Medical Research Strategic Plan.

Supporting First Nations-led Research

Western Alliance recognises the importance of demonstrating cultural humility and agility as an organisation. We endeavour to be responsive to the needs of the Communities we serve, and to privilege First Nations leadership. We recognise Community strength and work to amplify their voice and to ensure our processes and language reflect a strengths-based approach.

Western Alliance has appointed Jessica Payne, proud Yuwaalaraay woman, to oversee the scoping and co-design of a First Nations Knowledge Translation Coordinator (KTC) position role that will help to strengthen partnerships with First Nations Communities in co-design and research translation, build First Nations research translation capability and advance First Nations-led research and knowledge translation across western Victoria. Jessica is also the recipient of a 2026 Melbourne Poche Indigenous Health Leadership Fellowship, sponsored by Western Alliance.

Drew Aras and A/Prof Nicole Mercer, Western Alliance Board Director, continue to contribute to the development of the VACCHO *marra ngarrgoo marra goorri*, the Victorian Aboriginal Health, Medical and Wellbeing Research Accord as members of the Accord



Governance Group. This has included input into the development of the VACCHO Human Research Ethics Committee and the VACCHO Accreditation Scheme, both due for release early in the 2026/2027 financial year.

As a member of the Lowitja Institute, Western Alliance supported six Western Alliance team members to attend the Lowitja Institute Learning Summit in Adelaide in April 2026. All attended the ‘Best Practice Community Engagement across the Research Cycle - Connection before Collection’ workshop, with First Nations team members also eligible to attend the ‘Developing High Calibre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Researchers’ workshop.

2025-26 Activity Reports

Objective

Creating an enabling environment for translational research and research translation



Annual Symposium, Ballarat



Over two hundred people across two days gathered in Ballarat in November for our Annual Symposium, to reconnect with colleagues, forge new collaborations and showcase some of the fantastic research from western Victoria.

The event kicked off with the Deakin Rural Health Mental Health Showcase: Taking action on rural and regional mental health, featuring keynote speaker Anna Love, Victoria's Chief Mental Health Nurse, followed by oral presentations and a panel discussion.

The DELIVER Showcase followed, featuring keynote speaker Prof Gill Harvey, Deputy Director Knowledge Translation, Flinders University, rapid fire research presentations and a panel discussion on how to use evidence in business cases in a budget-constrained environment.

Day one wrapped up with the STaRR Emerging Researcher Showcase, which featured presentations from an exciting new generation of clinical researchers.

The Western Alliance Symposium on day two commenced with a beautiful Welcome to Country from Kellie Phillips, Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, followed by keynote speakers Dr Jill Gallagher AO, CEO of VACCHO and A/Prof Gustavo Machado, University of Sydney.

Concurrent sessions from over 50 local researchers then gave us a snapshot of the extensive and high-quality research underway in our region.

The event concluded with keynote speakers A/Prof Ecushla Linedale, South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute, and A/Prof Anna Wong Shee, Co-Director, the Centre for Australian Research into Access (CARA), before we bade farewell to Ballarat.

Sincere thanks to all our wonderful keynotes, panel members and researchers for making this year's Symposium bigger and better than ever.





Consumer and Community Involvement

Western Alliance Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) Hub

Western Alliance is excited to be working in partnership with Health Voices Victoria (HVV) at Deakin University to develop the Western Alliance Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) Hub, a centrally coordinated approach to CCI across Western Alliance member organisations.

Jess Franks and Steph Thow are overseeing this work in roles co-funded by Western Alliance and HVV. Steph is a proud Pennemuker and Ngāti Porou woman and will focus specifically on engaging with First Nations Community. Western Alliance Consumer Representatives Tess Marotta and Katherine Stanley will also have an important role in this work.

The Hub will focus on developing and implementing:

- CCI training for consumers, health professionals and researchers
- a streamlined policy/ process that ensures consumers are appropriately remunerated for their time and expertise and supported to participate meaningfully
- seed funding opportunities targeting the early involvement of consumers in research design
- a central bank of research-interested consumers
- a service to match these consumers with researchers and projects

Co-design of the Hub is underway, with a call for expressions of interest generating a high number of responses from people interested in being a member of the Strategic Advisory Group or the Co-design Group.

Western Alliance and Health Voices Victoria also joined forces for an online CCI workshop for researchers sponsored by STaRR and the DELIVER Program, which attracted 25 registrations from Western Alliance member organisations.



Jess Franks



Steph Thow



Consumer Representatives

Western Alliance recognises the importance of ensuring that consumers with lived experience and community members more broadly have opportunities to be involved in the design and implementation of health research. Our consumer representatives on the Western Alliance Board and Research Translation Committee continue to make a meaningful contribution to Western Alliance in providing a consumer voice and guiding our activities to ensure we are integrating consumer insights.



**Katherine Stanley,
Consumer
Representative on the
Western Alliance Board**

Katherine Stanley is an experienced advocate for consumer engagement in health service delivery and health research. She 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 in the hope of creating further change. Katherine has collaborated with Western Alliance member organisations on research projects focusing on the lived experience of pelvic pain and on creating holistic and comprehensive models of care for those with endometriosis.

Katherine's role on the Western Alliance 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.



**Tess Marotta, Consumer
Representative on the
Western Alliance Research
Translation Committee**

Tess is an experienced consumer advisor and consultant, who brings lived experience of chronic health conditions. She has gained valuable insights into the healthcare system and is passionate about improving healthcare outcomes through the integration of consumer insights. Tess actively engages with diverse communities and has experience in shaping research and influencing healthcare policy and delivery.

Tess supports Western Alliance as a consumer reviewer of applications for research funding. This ensures that consumers are participating in the decision-making on which research and translation projects Western Alliance supports and also enables consumer feedback and advice for applicants to strengthen the consumer and community involvement in their proposed projects.



**Mrs Marilyn Dolling,
Consumer Representative
on the Western Alliance
Research Translation
Committee**

Mrs Marilyn Dolling is a passionate advocate, empowered ambassador using her personal experiences as a cancer survivor, carer and family member to ensure optimal care resulting in a positive change in people's lives.

Marilyn is an experienced Chair with a demonstrated history of working in the education, hospital and health care industries. Her skills and interests include in-patient support, patient-centred care, palliative care, cancer advocacy and advocacy training, health literacy, supportive care, survivorship, optimal care pathways and aged care advocacy.

Marilyn provides a lived experience consumer and carer perspective in the co-development of Western Alliance initiatives.



Research Translation Coordinators

Western Alliance Research Translation Coordinators (RTCs) Dr Ella Ottrey, Dr Michael Field, Alison Buccheri, 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, 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.

In 2025 – 26 our RTCs were an invaluable resource to our members in supporting first-time and emerging researchers to navigate the research journey, and in providing flexible support for policy development, protocol writing and publication. They also supported and enabled multiple research and translation initiatives across the region, including research showcase events at Western Alliance member health services.



Dr Jessie Adams
South West
region



Dr Michael Field
Geelong & Colac region
(to February 2026)



Alison Buccheri
Colac region
(from February 2026)



Dr Ella Ottrey
East Grampians &
Maryborough region
(to May 2026)



Alesha Sayner
Grampians region



Biostatistics Support

To provide biostatistics support to member health service and PHN employees, Western Alliance continues to fund dedicated biostatistician services. Our biostatistician ensures that proposed projects can feasibly and accurately capture relevant data and supports the analysis of this data to demonstrate project results and outcomes.



Charlotte Molesworth
Consultant Biostatistician

Victorian Regional and Rural Ethics & Governance Network (VRREGN)



Western Alliance founded and continues to convene the Victorian Regional and Rural Ethics and Governance Network (VRREGN), a network of research ethics and governance officers, research managers and health service-based researchers from across regional and rural Victoria. Membership is open to all Victorian regional and rural health services with a research administration function.

VRREGN supports and enables high quality, efficient research ethics and governance in health settings across regional and rural Victoria by:

- collectively identifying, prioritising and addressing issues and opportunities relating to the regional and rural setting, and
- providing members with a support mechanism and opportunity for exchange of ideas and innovations.

Work in 2025-26 included consultations with state and federal government agencies and VACCHO regarding new policies and initiatives including;

- Strategic Ethics Review Project
- National Safety and Quality in HealthCare Standards
- National Clinical Trials Governance Framework
- Draft National Standard Operating Procedures for Clinical Trials in Australia
- National One Stop Shop
- VACCHO Human Research Ethics Committee and Accreditation

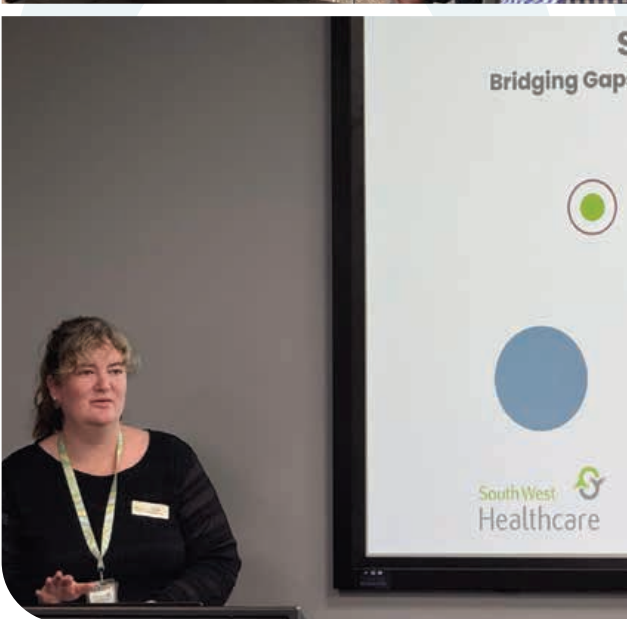
Objective

Creating an enabling environment for translational research and research translation



Showcasing research and supporting strategy development

In 2025-26, Western Alliance supported the development and delivery of successful 'Research Day' events at South West Healthcare, East Grampians Health Service, Barwon Health, Western District Health Service and Grampians Health, building and strengthening community connections and research collaborations for over 300 people across the region.



2025-26 Activity Reports

Objective

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



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

STaRR expanded its reach again this year, providing training and support to an increasing cohort of emerging researchers and mentors and contributing to stronger research capability across Western Alliance member organisations.

STaRR Emerging Researcher Training

Huge congratulations to the 2025-26 STaRR Emerging Researcher cohort. This year we introduced an option for emerging researchers to complete the STaRR Assessment Pathway. This was designed for those considering pursuing a higher degree by research, who have not completed the pre-requisite qualifications.

Sincere thanks to the STaRR mentors, workshop presenters and facilitators for their invaluable contributions to supporting the STaRR program.

During 2025-26 the STaRR program enabled:

- 110 Emerging Researchers to participate in STaRRlite, a half-day online research workshop designed for health practitioners with little or no previous research or quality improvement experience
- 20 Emerging Researchers to complete the STaRR Mentored Emerging Researcher workshops, including seven who completed the inaugural STaRR Assessment Pathway
- 5 STaRR Emerging Researchers to present at the STaRR Showcase at the Western Alliance Symposium
- 8 STaRR Emerging Researcher Grants to be awarded, 7 seed grants and 1 STaRRship translation grant;
- 52 members of the STaRR Mentor Network to support STaRR emerging researchers
- 8 STaRR Emerging Researchers and Mentors to participate in Implementation Science workshops;
- 17 STaRR Emerging Researchers and Mentors to participate in a Consumer and Community Involvement workshop
- Access to a new STaRR Resource: Introduction to Health Economics



Dr Olivia King presenting at the 2025 Rural and Remote Health Scientific Symposium in Alice Springs

STaRR Emerging Researcher Showcase

The annual STaRR Emerging Researcher Showcase was held as part of the Western Alliance Symposium in Ballarat in November 2025. Five past STaRR Emerging Researchers shared the outcomes and lessons from their research projects, and this was once again a highlight of the symposium program.

STaRR Mentor Network

Mentoring is a key element of the STaRR Emerging Researcher training program. The STaRR Mentor Network includes more than 50 health service and academic researchers who generously volunteer their time to provide one-on-one guidance and support to participants completing the 10-week training program. Most STaRR mentors are based in western Victoria, with additional mentors from metropolitan Melbourne and other locations, who share an interest in rural health and a commitment to developing clinician researchers.



Alison Bucchini
STaRR Program
Coordinator



Dr Olivia King
Manager, Research
Capability Building

Objective

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



Australian Clinical Trials Education Centre

The Australian Clinical Trials Education Centre (A-CTEC) is a not-for-profit, member-based initiative that has made learning resources for clinical trials accessible to the clinical trials workforce across Australia. Led by the VRTCC, the A-CTEC Steering Committee is chaired by the Western Alliance Executive Director.

As of June 2026, A-CTEC has over 500 users from Western Alliance member organisations, and over 25,000 across Australia. Educational content is supplemented by monthly webinars and quarterly regional symposia to support professional growth and success in the clinical research field.

The A-CTEC annual hybrid conference in March 2026 attracted over 450 clinical research professionals from across Australia, with the event selling out well in advance. The conference provided two dynamic days of thought-provoking panels, innovative debates, and insightful presentations led by industry professionals and expert speakers, all centered around the 2026 clinical trials theme: Moving Forward.



2025-26 Activity Reports

Objective

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



Key criteria for all Western Alliance funded research

Translation focus

Regional and rural western Victoria

Co-design with Western Alliance health partners

Consumer and community involvement

Uphold the principles of marra ngargoo, marra goorri

Rapid Research Translation Grants

The Rapid Research Translation Grants program focuses on supporting the translation of existing research and evidence into policy and practice, through implementation, evaluation and/or scaling within health settings. Congratulations to the 2025-26 grant recipients:



Not Just a Little Prick: Translating evidence into action on animal vaccine needlestick injuries in humans. Lead investigator: Prof Susan Brumby, Senior Researcher, Western District Health Service. Funding: \$34,385



HELPing prevent hospital-acquired delirium: evaluating the local implementation of an evidence-based, globally recognised prevention program. Lead investigator: Fiona Gray, Co-Director, Medicine, Emergency Medicine, Subacute and Home Care, Barwon Health. Funding: \$34,682



Improving the diagnosis and management of pulmonary embolism across western Victoria. Lead investigators: A/Prof Anna Dunn, Director, Respiratory Medicine, Barwon Health & Dr Jeremy Furyk, Emergency Physician, Barwon Health. Funding: \$54,000



PIVC SMART: Peripheral Intravenous Catheter Systematic Management, Assessment, and Removal Trial. Lead investigator: Karina Demasson, Research Assistant, Nursing and Midwifery, Grampians Health. Funding: \$12,100

Objective

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



2025 STaRRship

Research Translation Fellowships (STaRRships) with funding of up to \$15,000 are available for past STaRR participants and past Western Alliance Emerging Researcher grant recipients, to translate research evidence into practice. Congratulations to the 2025-26 grant recipient:



Renee Heard, Senior Speech Pathologist, Colac Area Health.
Co-Designing Person-Centred Eating and Drinking with Acknowledged Risk (EDAR) Clinical Practice Guidelines and Multidisciplinary Team Training for Rural and Regional Health Services. Funding: \$14,783

2025 STaRR Seed Grants

STaRR Emerging Researcher Seed Grants of up to \$5,000 available for past STaRR participants to conduct a research project to generate new evidence. Congratulations to the 2025-26 grant recipients:



Megan Battersby, Senior Dietitian, Barwon Health. *Effectiveness and costs of a novel program in reducing ED presentations and hospitalisations: an economic evaluation of the Connected Care Program.* Funding: \$4881



Joel Craddock, Coordinator Remote Patient Monitoring, Colac Area Health. *Understanding COPD Presentations in regional Victoria.* Funding: \$4876



Beth Davidson, Clinical Dietitian, Barwon Health. *Understanding dietitians' perspectives on weight stigma: a qualitative study in regional and rural healthcare services in the Barwon region.* Funding: \$4980



Alison Griffiths, Senior Physiotherapist, Grampians Health. *A descriptive, exploratory study of patient risk factors and screening processes for Developmental Hip Dysplasia in a regional health service.* Funding: \$4999



Abraham Nyieth and Wenjin Zhang, Mental health clinicians, Grampians Health. *Mental Clinicians' experiences in delivering family interventions for complex parent-child relationship in rural and regional public infant and child community mental health services.* Funding: \$5000



Jordan Swaney, Mental Health Occupational Therapist, Barwon Health. *Barriers and facilitators to vocational support: experiences of consumers and staff.* Funding: \$4926



Kate van Berkel, Dietitian, Barwon Health. *Balancing convenience and care in Gestational Diabetes management: A retrospective evaluation of a three-part evolving model of care using remote patient monitoring in the Geelong region.* Funding: \$4936



Support for Major External Research Grants

During 2025-26 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. This year Western Alliance supported 17 applications.

Three Western Alliance- supported MRFF grants of almost \$10M were successful in 2025-26:



A \$2.9M MRFF grant awarded to Prof Peter Vuillermin, Deakin University, entitled "A midwife-delivered prenatal dietary intervention to prevent perinatal depression and child neurocognitive vulnerability in regional and rural communities", which features Barwon Health, Grampians Health and Colac Area Health involvement.



**Prof Pete Vuillermin and
Dr Samantha Dawson**

Limited access to prenatal dietary support in regional and rural Australia increases the risk of perinatal depression and anxiety, adversely affecting child cognitive outcomes. This clinical trial, involving midwife nutrition coaches, aims to enhance support during pregnancy to promote better outcomes. The project, also led by Dr Samantha Dawson, builds on key discoveries from the Barwon Infant Study and the Deakin University Food & Mood Centre. It was co-designed in the context of the Western Alliance-funded Pregnancy Research and Translation Ecosystem study and leverages the development of the 'Bugs & Bumps' smartphone prenatal dietary intervention.



A \$2.6M MRFF grant awarded to Prof Antonina Mikocka-Walus, Deakin Lifespan Institute, entitled "Co-Designing, Evaluating, and Implementing Supportive Care for Adolescents and Young Adults with Crohn's and Colitis and their Carers (CAYAC)", which features Barwon Health involvement.

Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis are incurable and life-limiting gastrointestinal disorders, with peak onset between 15-29 years. Adolescents and young adults face the burden of disease at a critical stage of life, disrupting growth, puberty, education and psychosocial development. Over 50% report psychological distress. The CAYAC Trial will evaluate whether a psychological, restorative, movement and nutritional program improves youth and carer quality of life and mental health.



**Prof Antonina
Mikocka-Walus**



A \$3.98M MRFF grant awarded to A/Prof Lisa Olive, Deakin Lifespan Institute entitled "CALM-Kids: Optimising and embedding lifestyle therapy into routine childhood mental health services", which features Barwon Health involvement.

Approximately 14% of Australian children aged 4–11 have mental health disorders, with anxiety and mood disorders being two of the most common. CALM-Kids is an innovative, evidence-based program designed by A/Prof Olive that targets physical activity, diet, sleep and screen time to improve mental health symptoms in children. The research team will evaluate the clinical and cost-effectiveness of CALM-Kids and drive the program's implementation into routine practice. The anticipated outcome is an entirely new pathway in child mental health care that harnesses a broader workforce, including dietitians and exercise physiologists; with the potential to reduce the incidence of clinical disorders and burden on the mental health system.



**A/Prof
Lisa Olive**

A Western Alliance researcher snapshot:

Jessica Payne, proud Yuwaalaraay woman

Research Assistant, Grampians Health/ Western Alliance



2024

Jess, proud Yuwaalaraay woman, nurse and First Nations Health Advisor at Grampians Health (GH), participates in the Western Alliance STaRR Mentored Training Program with a research proposal to examine limitations and enablers in the Emergency Dept care pathway for First Nations patients at GH.

Using skills and connections developed through STaRR, Jess, with Karina Demasson, GH Nursing Research Assistant, apply for and receive a \$39k Western Alliance Rapid Research Translation Grant for Creating culturally safe care pathways for First Nations people in a rural emergency department.

With support from Western Alliance, Jess and Karina are also successful in applying for a \$50k project grant through the Medibank Better Health Research Hub to explore new, community led approaches to improve cultural safety, trust and engagement in emergency care.

2025

Jess, now a Research Assistant at GH, is also engaged by Western Alliance to oversee the scoping and co-design of a Western Alliance First Nations Knowledge Translation Coordinator role.

Jess and Karina present their research at the Western Alliance Symposium in Ballarat. Jess also presents at the MACH Aboriginal Health Showcase in Melbourne.

2026

Jess receives a 2026 Melbourne Poche Indigenous Health Leadership Fellowship sponsored by Western Alliance, to build leadership skills, drive change in Indigenous health and grow professional networks through practical, connected learning.

Future directions

During 2026-27, Western Alliance will continue to drive research translation and build capability across western Victoria, leveraging member contributions to support innovative programs, strengthen partnerships and deliver tangible benefits for health services, primary care, researchers and the community.

High priority future activities will include:

- launching the Western Alliance Consumer and Community Involvement in Research Hub;
- strengthening partnerships with First Nations Community and advancing First Nations-led research translation and capability building;
- further expanding the STaRR Program, including development of an online training component
- bridging research and health service quality improvement, including testing a model for rapid evidence review
- building on strong existing partnerships with other Research Translation Centres and government, and exploring new partnerships across Victoria and Australia; and
- establishing programs to improve access to clinical trials for rural and regional participants.

Other important information

Acknowledgements

Thank you

Western Alliance would like to thank its members and supporters, including the Western Alliance Board and Research Translation Committee, for their ongoing support and commitment to improving health outcomes in regional and rural Victoria.

Western Alliance would also like to thank its partners and collaborators, including the Australian Health Research Alliance (AHRA), the Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH), Monash Partners Health Translation Network, Health Voices Victoria, Lowitja Institute, VACCHO, Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), National Ageing Research Institute (NARI), Victorian Department of Health (DoH) and Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (DJSIR).

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