

ANNUAL REPORT

2020 - 2021

Western Alliance Health Research Ltd
(Western Alliance)

A photograph of a person standing on a large roll of corrugated metal, possibly a roof or a large container, under a dramatic sky with clouds. The person is in the center of the frame, looking towards the right. The metal roll is in the foreground, and the background shows a landscape with trees and a horizon line.

**WESTERN ALLIANCE
ACADEMIC HEALTH
SCIENCE CENTRE**

AN AUSTRALIAN-FIRST

Our Vision

Healthier regional and rural communities.

Western Alliance supports its members to improve the health of their communities through research-based and evidence-informed health care

Our Mission

We foster relationships between organisations and individuals who can influence regional and rural health outcomes and research.

We build capability of regional and rural health practitioners, researchers and consumers, enabling them to contribute to and benefit from health research.

We prioritise regional health problems and fund regional and rural health research teams to investigate, generate evidence and implement solutions.

We support development of nationally relevant models of regional and rural health research.

We work to achieve equitable funding for regional and rural health research.



Contents

Our mission	page 2
Our vision	page 2
Section 1 – An overview of Western Alliance	
About us	page 6
Our track record	page 7
Our partners	page 8
Our people	page 9
Board members	page 9
Employees and funded positions	page 9
Research Translation Committee members	page 10
Section 2 – Governance, Activities and Future Directions	
Our Structure	page 13
Western Alliance Organisational Structure	page 13
Chairperson's report	page 14
Our Strategic Priorities	page 16
Our Activities	page 20
Research Funding	page 20
Flagship Research Program	page 20
Emerging Researcher grants	page 21
External Funding support	page 22
Research Fellowships	page 22
Research and Translation Support	page 23
Research Translation Coordinators	page 24
Biostatistics and health economics support	page 25
Research ethics and governance	page 25
Social isolation and prescribing network	page 26
Falls Prevention Alliance	page 26
Research Capability Building	page 27
Partnerships	page 28
Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative	page 28
National Ageing Research Institute (NARI)	page 29
Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI)	page 29
Spinifex Network	page 29
Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) in Research	page 29
Future Directions	page 30
Section 3 – Other important information	
Acknowledgements	page 31
Contact us	page 32

Focus on Research Outcomes



LET'S HAVE A YARN ABOUT CHRONIC DISEASE: A COLLABORATIVE, MULTIDISCIPLINARY, PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO ADDRESSING ABORIGINAL HEALTH IN SOUTH-WESTERN VICTORIA

Lead Investigators: Hannah Beks, Associate Research Fellow - Deakin Rural Health & A/Prof Vin Versace, Director - Deakin Rural Health

Western Alliance Funding: Grant-in-aid Program

Let's have a yarn about chronic disease was undertaken in collaboration between Deakin Rural Health in Warrnambool and Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service (DWECHS), an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation located in Gunditjmara Country, Portland.

The systematic scoping review identified a small proportion of evaluated chronic disease programs implemented for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples residing in Inner and Outer Regional Australia, when compared to Major Cities of Australia, and a mean distance of 660 kilometres between the location of program implementation and evaluation (see Beks et al. 2019).

The need for localised approaches and research partnerships to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples residing in Inner and Outer Regional Australia was supported by the review findings. Yarning lunches identified numerous determinants of chronic disease management from the perspective of Community Members, such as health literacy, family responsibilities, relationship with GP.

Findings from the systematic scoping review were distributed nationally through the Lowitja Institute newsletter and locally to Aboriginal leaders. Findings from the yarning lunches were provided to DWECHS to inform the ongoing delivery of clinical services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the region.



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 comprised of 12 member organisations located across the Barwon/Southwest and Grampians regions of western Victoria. The two regions have a combined population of over 660,000 residents or approximately 44% of rural/regional Victoria's population. Members include six regional, sub-regional and local public health services, three private hospitals, a primary health network and two universities.

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.

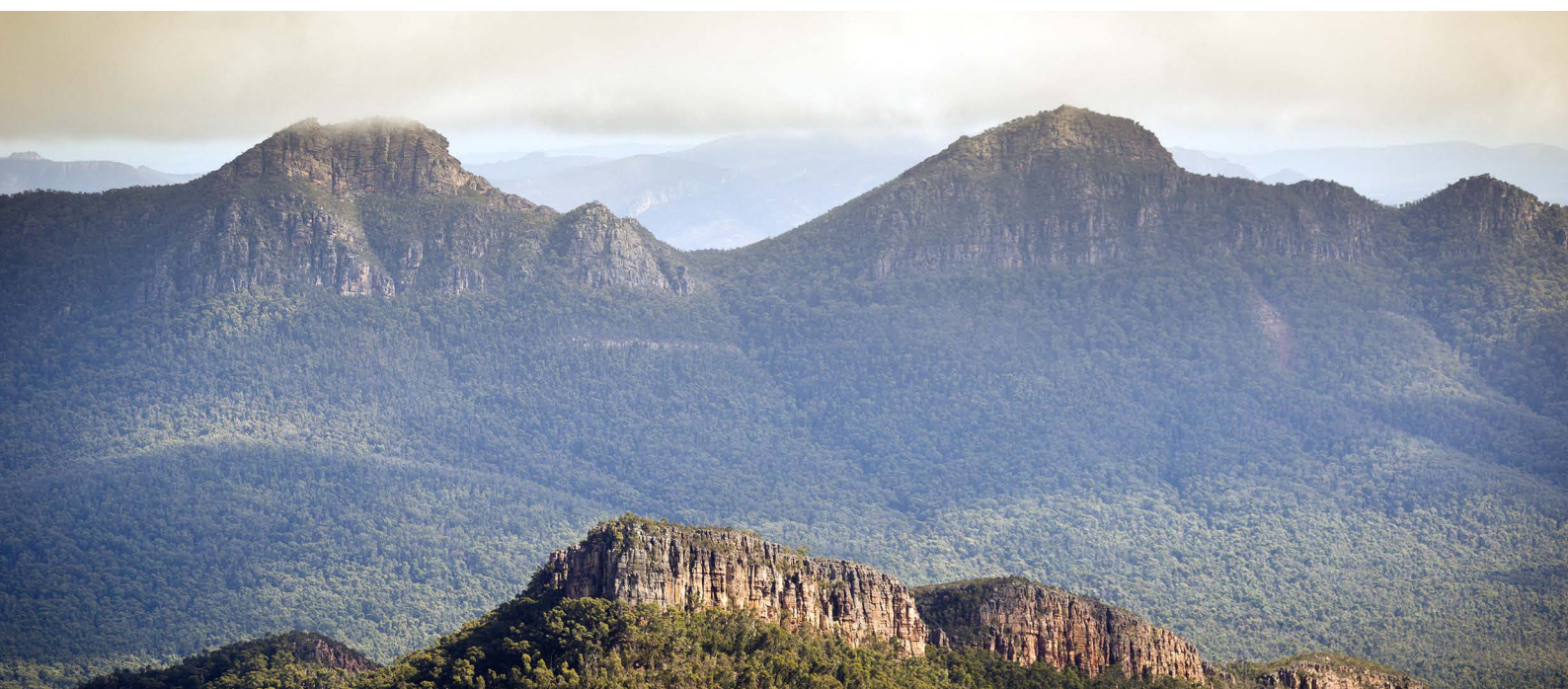
Targeted research strategies and systematic translation efforts spanning health services, primary care, academic institutions and regional boundaries advance the delivery of research-based and evidence-informed health care across western Victoria.

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.

Western Alliance has established important collaborations with leading national and state-based organisations to improve our capacity to support research in our priority themes and platforms. To date, Western Alliance has supported over 45 studies, including seed funding and financial contributions to large NHMRC-funded projects.

The Alliance delivers a broad research education program, including funding for multi-year research fellowships. 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 three year strategic plan is dedicated to enabling research that will help to address the key health issues faced by our member organisations.



Our track record

Western Alliance funded studies include:

- Identifying barriers, facilitators and strategies for implementing cardiac tele-rehabilitation to address access inequalities in western Victoria
- What is the prevalence of malnutrition in a small rural health service? Evaluation of a malnutrition screening program
- Let's have a yarn about chronic disease: A collaborative, multidisciplinary, participatory action research approach to addressing Aboriginal health in south-western Victoria
- The Rural Acute Hospital Data Register (RAHDaR)
- Chronic disease, injury and ageing in western Victoria: opportunities to improve health delivery
- A Post-Hospital Discharge Pharmacist Medication Management Service for High Risk Patients Using Telehealth
- Development of a Grampians small towns cancer strategy
- Developing a best-practice, pre-operative exercise therapy 'prehabilitation' model for patients with prostate, colon and breast cancer in the Grampians region of Victoria
- Whole of systems trial of prevention strategies for childhood obesity: WHO STOPS childhood obesity
- COVID-19 geographical equity in a pandemic
- Evaluation of telehealth services implemented for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the primary healthcare setting
- The rapid adoption of telehealth by a regional community-based palliative care service due to COVID-19: Patient and health care professional perspectives and opportunities for service enhancement
- Investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and wellbeing of staff in rural health services
- Evaluation of the expansion of telehealth through primary care in Australia
- The Pregnancy Research and Translation Ecosystem (PRT-E)
- A listening and learning healthcare system approach to improve outcomes for acute-care mental health consumers in the Barwon-Southwest Victoria region



Our partners

Who we are

Western Alliance's member organisations comprise two major regional city-based health services: Ballarat Health Services and Barwon Health; four smaller regional and rural health services: Colac Area Health, East Grampians Health Service, South West Healthcare, Western District Health Service, and; three private hospitals: the St. John of God hospitals in Geelong, Ballarat and Warrnambool;

the Western Victoria Primary Health Network (PHN); and two regionally based academic institutions: Deakin and Federation Universities.

Western Alliance members host several world-standard research institutes and centres that actively contribute to evidence-based improvements in rural and regional health and healthcare.

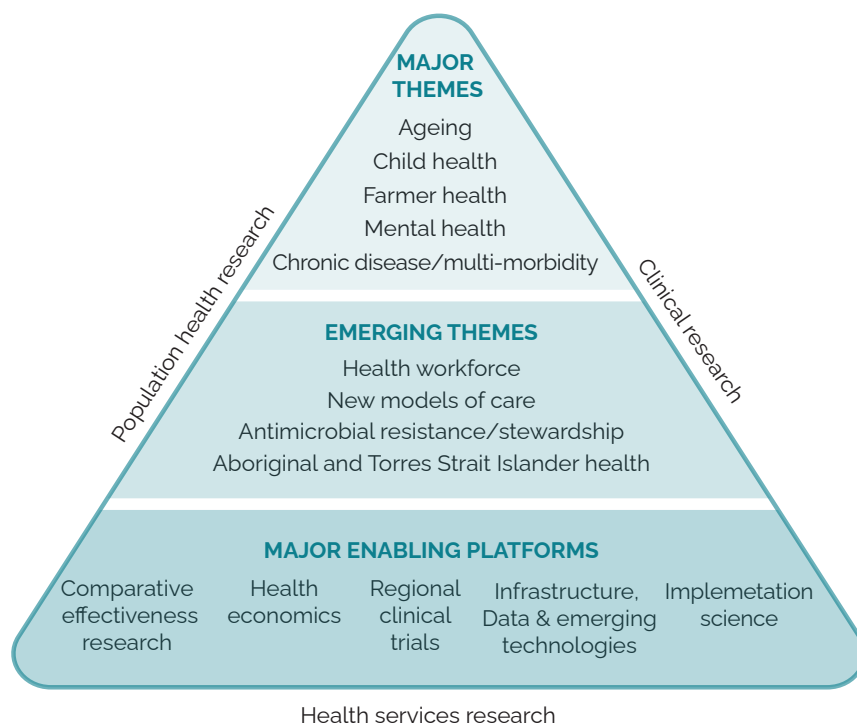


Our Research Focus Areas

UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

- > Prevention
- > Access to health services
- > Equity
- > Quality, safety & innovation
- > Promoting consumer engagement
- > Collaboration & communication in healthcare
- > Stimulating engagement with other industries & sectors

RESEARCH FOCUS AREAS



Our people

Board members

NAME	POSITION	DATES (if not for whole year)
Professor Brendan Crotty	Chair/Director	
Ms Rowena Clift	Director	From June 2020
Ms Frances Diver	Director	
Mr Dale Fraser	Treasurer/Director	
Dr Sarah Leach	Director	To February 2021
Professor Warren Payne	Director	
Mr Rohan Fitzgerald	Director	
Mr Craig Fraser	Director	
Ms Fiona Brew	Director	
Mr Mario Santilli	Director	
Mr Chris Hutchison	Director	
Ms Rachel Huxley	Director	From January 2020

Employees and funded positions

NAME	POSITION	DATES (if not for whole year)
Professor Warren Payne	Executive Director	
Mr Andrew (Drew) Aras	Executive Officer	
Ms Cassandra Hamilton	Administrative Officer	
Mrs Jessica Jebramek	Associate Research Fellow	
Dr Laura Alston	Associate Research Fellow	
Mrs Jaclyn Bishop	Research Translation Coordinator	
Dr Michael Field	Research Translation Coordinator	
Dr Louise Greenstock	Research Translation Coordinator	
Ms Sarah Shaw	Research Communications Support Officer	From May 2021

Research Translation Committee members

NAME	POSITION	DATES (if not for whole year)
A/Professor Anna Wong Shee	Chair	
A/Professor Rosemary Aldrich	Member	To April 2021
Professor Warren Payne	Member	
Dr Olivia King	Member	
Mr Drew Aras	Member	
Ms Barbara Moll	Member	
Mr Mario Santilli	Member	
Ms Susan Morrissey	Member	To October 2020
Professor Peter Vuillermin	Member	
Professor Susan Brumby	Member	
Professor Anna Peeters	Member	
A/Professor Mark Yates	Member	
Professor Fergal Grace	Member	
Ms Samantha Sharp	Member	To April 2021
Dr Laura Alston	Member	
A/Professor Vincent Versace	Member	
Professor Alison Hutchison	Member	
Dr Michael Field	Member	
Ms Ashleigh Clarke	Member	
Mrs Jaclyn Bishop	Member	
Dr Louise Greenstock	Member	
Professor Colette Browning	Member	From February 2021
Mrs Marilyn Dolling	Consumer Representative	



Focus on Research Outcomes



TELEHEALTH: RAPID ADOPTION IN COMMUNITY PALLIATIVE CARE DUE TO COVID-19: PATIENT AND PROFESSIONAL EVALUATION

Lead investigators: Dr Peter Eastman – Co-head, Palliative Care, Anna Dowd – Clinical Trial Coordinator, Jacqui White – Palliative Care Program Manager, Matthew Ely – Senior clinician physiotherapist, Jill Carter – Clinical Nurse Consultant Community Palliative Care Service

Western Alliance Funding: COVID-19 Research Grant Program

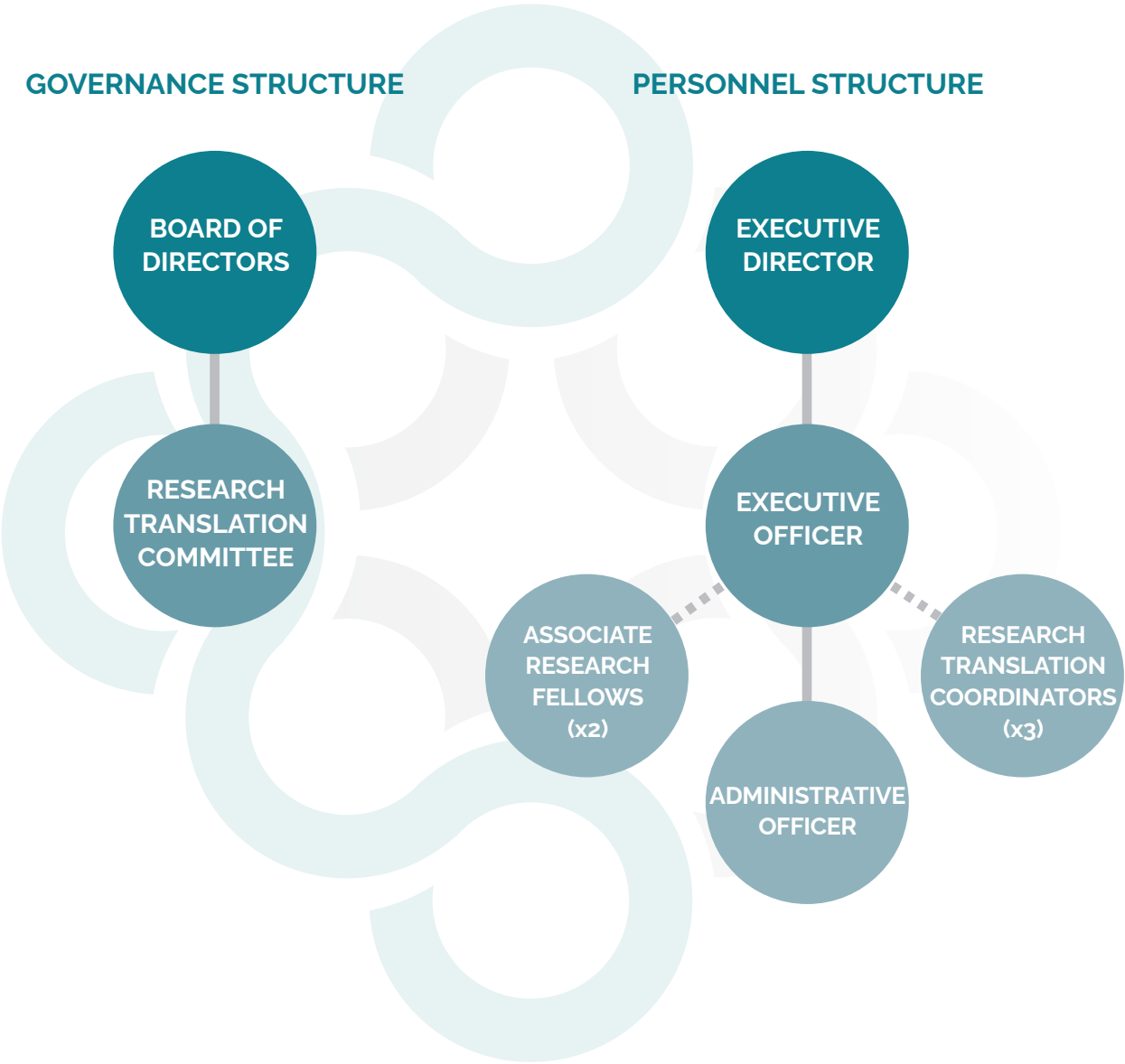
The COVID-19 pandemic brought the use of telehealth to the fore, as social distancing and isolation have meant many people have been unable to interact directly with health care professionals (HCP). For community palliative care (CPC) services this has meant a sudden change away from a predominantly face-to-face (F2F) model of care to one that incorporates telehealth. The Barwon Health Palliative Care research team study evaluated patient and HCP perspectives on the rapid adoption of telehealth by the Barwon Health CPC service.

The preference of both patient and HCP groups was for a CPC service model that combined face-to-face and telehealth consultations moving forward. This question has not been asked specifically before and therefore this information is fairly unique. It will be important not just for future planning around high value care provision at a loco-regional level but also, potentially, the enhancement of care models for more rural and remote areas where on the ground palliative care services are more limited.

Our structure

Western Alliance operates as a company limited by guarantee and is registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). In June 2019, the Western Alliance Board was expanded to include representation from all member organisations, and the Western Alliance Research Translation Committee was established. The Research Translation Committee is made up of health practitioners, researchers and consumers from across the Western Alliance member base, and advises on the development of Western Alliance operational activities as well as providing a feedback loop between the Alliance and its member organisations.

Western Alliance organisational structure



Chairperson's report



The 2021 financial year has been extremely challenging, with COVID-19 and the response to the pandemic having a major impact on Victorian communities. Our thoughts are with the families and loved ones of those who have lost their lives, those who continue to be affected by the measures put in place to control the spread of the virus and those who have suffered from the economic impact of the pandemic.

The response of Western Alliance member health services to the pandemic has been impressive; managing a significant number of active COVID-19 cases in our region and setting a benchmark for contact tracing.

Western Alliance has worked hard to support our member organisations during this time. Although the pandemic inevitably led to the delay or postponement of some of our planned activities, we have been able to consolidate a number of programs and implement a range of new initiatives. These initiatives have supported the growth of translation-focussed research, built research capability and improved governance and sustainability. We have also advocated strongly for an increased focus on rural and regional research, both in Victoria and nationally. Highlights include:

- Tackling a key regional issue through collaborative, translation-focussed research as part of our inaugural, competitively funded **Flagship Research Program**. This was awarded to Professor Peter Vuillermin and his team for their program entitled 'The Pregnancy Research and Translation Ecosystem (PRT-E)', with \$200,000 provided to support this work
- Supporting research capability building across western Victoria through our **Emerging Researcher Grants Program**, which saw \$60,000 of competitive seed funding (up to \$5,000 per project) awarded to thirteen emerging health practitioner researchers.
- Supporting local, large-scale collaborative research through our **External Funding Support Program**, with a \$20,000 contribution to Professor Andrea Driscoll and her team, who were successful in attracting \$1.5m as part of an NHMRC Partnership Grant for a research project entitled 'I-HEART - Implementation of heart failure guidelines in Regional Australia'.
- The progression of our two **Western Alliance Associate Research Fellows**, with Dr Laura Alston securing a coveted National Heart Foundation Fellowship, and Jessica Jebramek transitioning her work into a PhD program
- Consolidation of our **Research Translation Coordinator** program and securing funding from the Victorian state government to further extend their roles. These health service embedded positions have had a tangible impact on research capability building and research translation across western Victoria.
- Facilitating and funding access for regional clinicians and researchers to **specialist research support** through the Deakin Biostatistics Unit and Deakin Health Economics.

- Contributing to improvements in rural and regional research ethics and governance through the establishment of the Victorian Rural and Regional Ethics and Governance Network (VREGGN)
- Consolidation of the Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative (VRTCC) comprising Western Alliance, Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH) and Monash Partners, which is now overseeing a range of research and capability building activity at a statewide level, including; the Victorian Collaborative Healthcare Recovery Initiative (VCHRI), the Victorian Falls Prevention Alliance, the Victorian Social Isolation and Prescribing Network, and the Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Initiative.
- Further development and consolidation of strategic relationships on key Western Alliance priority themes, through research co-funding and collaboration with the National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI).
- Advocating for rural and regional health research at a national level, through Western Alliance's role in the Spinifex Network, an Australia-wide network of health, medical and community organizations dedicated to improving the impact of research in rural/regional settings.
- Commencing our centrepiece research capability building program, STaRR (Supporting Translation of Research In Rural and Regional areas), a comprehensive and practical research training package
- Improving opportunities for consumers and community members to be involved in research, through funding and coordination of 'Consumer Participation in Research' training by the Health Issues Centre, and development of a 'Consumer and Community Involvement in Research Network' across western Victoria

I would like to thank all our member organisations for your ongoing support of the Western Alliance and particularly the members of our Board and Research Translation Committee. I look forward to working with you all towards our goal of healthier regional and rural communities.



Professor Brendan Crotty, Board Chair

Western Alliance Academic Health Science Centre

Our strategic priorities

OUR GOALS FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS

DEVELOP

1

Build regional and rural research culture, capacity and capability

TRANSLATE

2

Facilitate and support high value translational research

SUSTAIN


3

Strengthen the sustainability of the Alliance

GROW

4

Position the Alliance for state-wide and national influence



Western Alliance is uniquely positioned to demonstrate the ways in which rural and regionally focused research can improve the health of local communities. Western Alliance is an enabler of, and contributor to, a journey that starts with consumer and health practitioner-informed identification of health and healthcare issues. These are converted into high quality research hypotheses and translated into health system outcomes by skilled health research teams working with regional practitioners. By developing and piloting models of research appropriate to the regional and rural

communities it serves, and by communicating, engaging with and advocating for organisations in other regions to support their own local efforts, Western Alliance aspires to improve the health of regional and rural Victorians. The strategic priorities identified by Western Alliance in its 2020-23 plan are targeted to building the research culture of its health service members in alignment with the long term goal of facilitating the establishment of a rural and regional health research network for all of Victoria. Western Alliance will achieve its strategic goals through the following priorities.



Our priorities for the next three years

1 DEVELOP

Build regional and rural research culture, capacity and capability

- 1.1** Deliver a region-wide translational research education program
- 1.2** Review membership model and facilitate membership by all eligible organisations
- 1.3** Train health practitioners and consumers in research co-design and consumer engagement
- 1.4** Work with other regions to develop state-wide regional & rural research capacity and capability building initiatives

2 TRANSLATE

Facilitate and support high value translational research

- 2.1** Validate priority research themes and consolidate processes for defining priority research topics and questions
- 2.2** Target funding to priority health research themes and questions that have potential to improve rural and regional practice and health outcomes
- 2.3** Develop practical systems, processes and resources to support high value translational research in the region, interfacing with existing health service quality improvement activities
- 2.4** Reduce barriers to conducting research in rural and regional health settings by working to improve consistency, ease of use and clarity of research ethics and governance processes

3 SUSTAIN

Strengthen the Alliance's sustainability

- 3.1** Revise and consolidate organisational governance structures as appropriate
- 3.2** Develop and implement a communication and engagement strategy with a focus on members, consumers and communities
- 3.3** Establish an evaluation framework and continuously evaluate performance
- 3.4** Prepare to respond to future national opportunities

4 GROW

Position the Alliance for state-wide and national influence

- 4.1** Strengthen alignment with regional and rural health priorities
- 4.2** Advocate for equitable state and national support for regional and rural translational research
- 4.2** Strengthen links with Victorian Advanced Health Research & Translation Centres (AHRTCs) and other relevant research entities
- 4.4** Prepare to respond to future national opportunities



Focus on Research Outcomes



IDENTIFYING RESEARCH PRIORITIES TO OPTIMIZE ALLIED HEALTH CARE – INFORMED BY CONSUMERS

Lead Investigators: A/Prof Anna Wong Shee, Ballarat Health Service & Deakin University, Dr Renee Clapham, Ballarat Health Service & Deakin University, Dr John Aitken, Rural Northwest Health & La Trobe University, Ms Jaithri Ananthapavan, Deakin University, A/Prof Kevin McNamara, Deakin University, Dr Anna Ugalde, Deakin University, Dr Alex Donaldson, La Trobe University, A/Prof Vincent Versace, Deakin University

Western Alliance Funding: Project Grant Program

The aim of the study was to identify actionable priorities for allied health research in the Grampians region that can be rapidly translated into practice.

This project involved early and regular engagement of community members (including vulnerable groups) and health professionals. The collaborative approach to setting research priorities gave clinicians, consumers and researchers a voice and ownership in research decision-making.

The initial community consultations highlighted the impact of social determinants on rural health outcomes, and the access and equity issues that rural health consumers face in dealing with these challenges.

This project has generated new research networks and strengthened existing research partnerships. This project creates opportunities for ongoing research capacity building and forms the foundation for future health research in the Grampians region.

Our commitment

Over the next three years we will demonstrate our commitment to healthier regional and rural communities by:

DEVELOP

- Attracting broad membership across Western Victoria
- Building research literacy across our membership
- Supporting the development of organisational research plans/frameworks for Alliance members

- Assisting our members to navigate research ethics and governance processes

- Embedding Research Translation Coordinators as a resource for our regional and rural health services

- Developing and delivering research education and training resources – including on-line modules for flexible delivery and greater access

- Designing and implementing research funding programs that meet the needs of regional and rural health practitioner researchers and their communities.

TRANSLATE

- Achieving recognition of Western Alliance as an authority and resource for rural and regional health research

- Adopting a governance structure that supports inclusive membership

- Promoting research as core business for rural and regional health services

- Developing and advocating for career pathways for clinician-researchers in rural and regional health services

- Advocating for state and national research ethics and governance policies and procedures that take into account the needs of rural and regional health services

SUSTAIN

- Supporting health service quality improvement activities through application of research principles

- Bringing Alliance members together in networked and collaborative research projects aligned with our key themes and priorities

- Developing a series of projects that strengthen research collaboration between members

- Supporting one or more flagship projects that bring our partners together for the benefit of rural and regional health

- Engaging the community in the design and implementation of research that improves the health of the community

GROW

- Establishing links with AHRTC's and other research centres and entities

- Developing and demonstrating established networks and collaborations that will enable a state-wide CIRH bid

- Increasing engagement with major regional health services in Victoria and Nationally

Our activities

Supporting and funding translation focussed research, building research capability and advocating for improved rural/regional health outcomes via a multifaceted program of:

- Research Funding
- Research & Translation Support
- Research Capability Building
- Consumer & Community Involvement
- Partnerships
- Advocacy for Rural and Regional Health Research

RESEARCH FUNDING

Flagship Research Program

In December 2020 Western Alliance opened expressions of interest for an exciting new funding initiative – our inaugural Flagship Research Program. The goal of the program is to bring together collaborative research teams across western Victoria to address a key problem based on the priority areas of our health partners and to support a program of research activity and capacity building that would assist in solving it. Western Alliance supported this initiative with \$200,000 in funding over two years.

After a rigorous competitive selection process, in April 2021 we were delighted to announce the successful recipient, 'The Pregnancy Research and Translation Ecosystem (PRT-E)', a project developed by Deakin University and health services in our region involved in pregnancy care, led by Professor Peter Vuillermin.

A collaboration between Barwon Health, Ballarat Health Services, East Grampians Health Service, Colac Area Health, Western District Health Service, Deakin University, GenV (Murdoch Children's Research Institute) and Federation University, the research will help to generate and implement best evidence to improve maternal and infant health.

PRT-E will collect data on regional pregnancy care and collaborate with the GenV initiative, which aims to recruit and follow 80% of all infants born in Victoria over the coming 2 years. This data will create a world-leading and unique resource for future research.

In parallel, PRT-E will establish a Pregnancy Stakeholder Working Group of consumers and health professionals that will be trained and supported by the established systems of Deakin University's Institute of Health Transformation.

Regional researchers will co-design and co-produce the research program. A starting priority will be to design a clinical trial and translation plan with the aim of safely reducing the caesarean section rate in the region, which has risen to around 40%: a complex problem requiring a multifaceted intervention.

Our congratulations to the PRT-E team. We look forward to seeing the difference that this research will make in the region over the coming years.



Emerging Researcher Grants

Through our capability building programs Western Alliance provides direct support to emerging health practitioner researchers across western Victoria. In 2020 we were thrilled to offer a research grant round specifically targeted at this group, our 'Emerging Researcher Grant' program. Seed funding of up to \$5,000 per recipient was made available through a competitive funding round between September 2020 and January 2021.

Objectives of the Emerging Researcher Grant program:

- Support capability building and staff development in translation focussed research;
- Support pilot projects or projects for which funding from traditional sources is difficult to attract and/or where staffing resources limit the ability of clinical staff to be involved in research activities;
- Support work that benefits the western Victorian community and addresses the strategic objectives of Western Alliance and its member organisations;
- Support projects that will lead to applications for larger grants or funding;
- Develop and strengthen the research culture within Western Alliance health sector member organisations;

We received 29 submissions for this round and allocated 13 grants to emerging health practitioner researchers across the region. We congratulate the successful candidates below, and also recognise the many high-standard projects which were not allocated funding in this round. We thank all applicants for their time and dedication and our review panel who worked diligently to reach this outcome. The successful applicants and their projects were:

- Robert Beavan & Ben Spedding, South West Healthcare & Barwon Health: Asymptomatic peripheral arterial disease (PAD): A community based multidisciplinary early intervention vascular clinic – A feasibility study

- Alicia Boyd, St John of God Warrnambool: Total Knee Arthroplasty (TKA): Post-Surgical Swelling Assessment- a Feasibility Study utilising Bioimpedance Spectroscopy (BIS)
- Jayde Cesarek, Western Victoria PHN: Covid-19 and men's mental health in western Victoria
- Renee Heard, Barwon Health: Implementing a Risk Feeding Policy and Education Program for Multidisciplinary Clinicians Participating in Risk Feeding Practise at Barwon Health
- Adelene Hilbig, Barwon Health: Management of possible cervical spine injury in paediatric patients in rural and regional emergency departments in Australia: a retrospective cohort study
- Jessica McDonald & Sarah Kelley, Barwon Health: Making the call: Improving timely access to community health physiotherapy services
- Suzanne Rayner, Barwon Health: Exploring perception and experience of leadership amongst emergency medicine practitioners
- Jake Romein, East Grampians Health Service: A community based modified sport program for rural community dwelling older adults: A pilot study
- Judith Russell, Ballarat Health Services: The challenges of breastfeeding a late preterm or early term infant: women's and clinicians' perceptions of provision of antenatal information when considering early planned birth
- Jessica Seater, Ballarat Health Services: Intra-infusion exercise in the Ballarat Regional Integrated Cancer Centre Chemotherapy Day Unit – A pilot study
- Elouise Simpson, South West Healthcare: Rectus abdominis vs transversus abdominis training in reducing the interrecti distance in early postpartum patients with DRAM: a randomised controlled trial
- Hirva Thaker, Western District Health Service: Preventing pathology related errors
- Sarah Williams, Ballarat Health Service: The role of relapse prevention plans for mental health consumers in reducing acute inpatient admissions

External Funding Support

Over the past five years Western Alliance has committed both financial and in-kind contributions to major external research grant applications, including NHMRC Partnership Grants. In 2020 Western Alliance established a program and expression of interest process for members to formally access support for major external research grants (both in kind and cash of up to \$20,000 per grant), targeting collaborative, translation-focussed projects based across western Victoria.

By supporting Western Alliance member organisations we are increasing the probability of important translation-focussed research being conducted in western Victoria. To be eligible for support, projects must demonstrate:

- Alignment to Western Alliance principles and focus areas
- Applicability to regional/rural western Victoria
- Involvement of 2 or more Western Alliance partners (including at least one health sector partner)
- A focus on translation/implementation (or likely impact)

In May 2021 Western Alliance was excited to announce support for our first successful externally funded project through this initiative. The project will be led by Professor Andrea Driscoll and her Deakin University research team, who were successful in attracting \$1.5 million for an NHMRC Partnership Grant for a research project entitled 'I-HEART - Implementation of HEART failure guidelines in Regional AusTralia'. The project includes collaboration from several Western Alliance member health services, as well as in kind support and a \$20,000 contribution to the project from Western Alliance.

Research Fellowships

The Western Alliance Associate Research Fellowship program commenced in 2018 to support development of collaborative, applied and translational research that will improve health outcomes for people and communities in the western region of Victoria.

Two Western Alliance Associate Research Fellows have continued work on their projects this year. Jess Jebramek, our 2018 Fellow, is nearing the completion of her project 'Subtle cognitive indicators in the prediction of post-operative delirium: the role of the digital clock drawing test' and will transition to a PhD to continue her research on this important topic.

The 2019 Fellow, Dr Laura Alston (Colac Area Health/Deakin University), was recently awarded a coveted National Heart Foundation Research Fellowship, building on her Western Alliance funded project titled: 'Preventing chronic diseases in rural populations for future generations: the role of rural health services in guiding community efforts to improve the food environment.' We congratulate Laura on this achievement and look forward to seeing where her career takes her next.

RESEARCH AND TRANSLATION SUPPORT

Research Translation Coordinators

Our three Research Translation Coordinators; Jaclyn Bishop, Michael Field and Louise Greenstock, have now 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 together 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.

The objectives of these roles are to:

- Provide technical support for developing and translating research evidence in the regional health setting.
- Develop and deliver research capacity and capability building initiatives, including translation focussed research training.
- Support organisations and researchers to build and navigate research ethics and governance processes

During the 2020/2021 financial year, the following outcomes were collectively achieved by the Research Translation Coordinators

- Coordinated health service led bids for research grant funding resulting in \$113,676 directly to rural and regional health services in western Victoria.
- Supported bids for research grant funding (particularly in enabling the co-design and engagement of rural and regional health services with academic partners) resulting in the attraction of over \$2.5 million.

- Co-developed and co-facilitated the STaRR training programs (Research Mentors Program, Health Managers and Leaders Program and Emerging Researcher Program)
- Directly provided translation focussed research support to over 200 health practitioners within health services and primary care across western Victoria.
- Supported the Western Victoria Primary Health Network to develop a research committee and a formal process for developing and supporting research.
- Supported regional health practitioner researchers to access biostatistics and health economics consultations.
- Developed new research committees and research governance processes for sub-regional and rural health services including East Grampians Health Service, Colac Area Health and Western District Health Service.

MEET OUR RESEARCH TRANSLATION COORDINATORS

Dr Louise Greenstock,
PhD Human Communication
PG Cert (Social Sciences)
South West/Western District
(Warrnambool/Hamilton)



Tell us about your role?

In this role, I support and mentor clinical and non-clinical researchers at Western District Health Service, South West Healthcare, St John of God Warrnambool, WestVic PHN and Deakin Rural Health. I also link health services and researchers, and assist health services once they are involved in a research project.

We try our best to enable high-quality health service-led translational research that improves the health outcomes of the communities in our region.

What is your advice for potential & current researchers?

I really encourage clinical and non-clinical researchers to approach us (the Research Translation Coordinators) for help. Having a mentor in any new skill can alleviate the burden of learning alone. There is a whole regional network of likeminded research-active people we can connect you with.

Louise commenced her role in June 2020, and is employed by Western District Health Service covering Western Alliance member organisations the Hamilton/Warrnambool region.

Jaclyn Bishop,
BPham (Hons)
GradCertMgt:
Ballarat/Grampians Region



Tell us about your role?

My role supports local researchers at East Grampians Health Service, Ballarat Health Services and Western Victorian Primary Health Network at all experience levels, whether that be with hands on support across an entire research project or just advice when needed. I also support connections between local researchers and any expertise or resources they may require (e.g. academic experts, community partners, other researchers in the region).

Why is rural/regional translational research so important?

We need to be smart with the limited resources in the rural setting. Translation allows you to apply knowledge gained from another setting, rather than re-inventing the wheel. You can then focus on implementation, evaluation and sharing your experiences from the rural setting.

Dr Michael Field,
MBBS, BA (Psych)
BCom
BA
Geelong/Colac Region



Tell us about your role?

My role as Research Translation Coordinator is focussed on working with health service and university partners in the Geelong and Colac regions to build research capacity.

What are you looking forward to in the role?

I'm looking forward to working with 'Emerging Researcher' grant recipients to assist them in developing and executing their research projects, and strengthening links between researchers in clinical and academic settings.

BIOSTATISTICS AND HEALTH ECONOMICS SUPPORT

Feedback from our member health services, particularly those in sub-regional and rural areas, has indicated that accessing specialised research support, particularly for biostatistics and health economics, can be extremely difficult and cost prohibitive.

As Deakin University has significant expertise in these areas, Western Alliance has developed and funded an initiative to enable health sector-based researchers to access this support. After piloting in early 2020, access to this program has been provided for our health sector members throughout the 2021 financial year. Through initial discussions with our Research Translation Coordinators there has been regular uptake of both biostatistics support (through Deakin Biostatistics Unit) and health economics support (through Deakin Health Economics).

RESEARCH ETHICS AND GOVERNANCE

Research ethics and governance is often cited as a major barrier to clinicians in health settings initiating and pursuing research activities, particularly in rural and regional areas. In late 2020 Western Alliance established the Victorian Rural and Regional Ethics and Governance Network (VRREGN) with representation from across regional and rural Victoria to collectively identify and address issues relating to research ethics and governance. VRREGN is now a formal working group of the state-wide Health Research Manager's (HRM) forum.

During the 2020/2021 financial year priorities for the network were identified and work commenced to reduce duplication and improve consistency and clarity in processes across the region. Progress to date has included:

The objectives of these roles are to:

- Establishing a streamlined ethics/governance fee structure across regional Victoria
- Clarifying governance processes for rural health services and multisite ethical approval for regional services
- Engaging University Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) in discussion to clarify processes for hospital based research ethics requirements and to reduce the requirements for review by multiple HRECs
- Identification of training needs and funding and facilitation of Good Clinical Practice (GCP) and HREC member training for over 85 participants across western Victoria

This work has also been progressed through the Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Initiative. In partnership with the two other Victorian Academic Health Science Centres, Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH) and Monash Partners Academic Health Science Centre (MP), Western Alliance collaborated on a number of harmonisation initiatives to reduce the administrative burden of multi-site clinical research in Victoria.

The Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Working Group (Working Group) was formed in 2020 with funding from the State Government. The purpose of the Working Group is to identify and, where possible, minimise disparity of research governance processes across Victorian hospitals and to formulate recommendations for further reform. The Working Group comprises key representatives from Victorian Health Services and the three Academic Health Science Centres (MACH, MP and WA).

Activities to date include:

- An environmental scan and qualitative interviews with twenty-four ethics and governance support staff and clinical research stakeholders across Victoria
- A two-stage modified Delphi process, incorporating key themes from analysis of the qualitative interviews and Working Group discussions, to identify priorities for improved harmonisation of research governance processes.
- A state-wide stakeholder survey to deepen understanding of the identified priorities with 341 participants.
- Two state-wide stakeholder consultation workshops with 64 participants from 30 clinical sites to present the findings of the environmental scan and survey, and co-design work streams.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND PRESCRIBING NETWORK

Awareness of loneliness and social isolation as significant public health and wellbeing issues has increased in recent years, along with the development of targeted government and community support programs for affected Australians.

A collaboration with the Australian Disease Management Association, Bolton Clarke Research Institute, Melbourne Academic Centre for Health, Melbourne School of Population & Global Health, Monash Partners, and the Western Alliance has developed an extensive network of stakeholders researching or developing programs of support for social isolation.

The collaboration commenced in 2020 with a series of online forums focusing on social isolation and social prescribing, which were so popular they have continued through 2021. The webinars include a mix of research and learnings from trials and services that have been implemented, and provide an opportunity to collate what is being done across Australia. They are open to all healthcare and social care sector workers, researchers and policy makers.

FALLS PREVENTION ALLIANCE

Falls are a leading cause of preventable harm and suffering in community, hospital and residential aged care settings.

An inaugural Falls Prevention Workshop held in March 2021 attracted almost 300 participants across Victoria. The workshop presented the latest research on hospital-based falls prevention and provided an opportunity to discuss challenges and opportunities to work collaboratively. Key messages arising from the Workshop included:

- The importance of individual assessment of a patient's needs in relation to falls prevention.
- The need to work together to translate research evidence on falls prevention (Eg. the UK National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) guideline and pathway).
- The importance of tailoring approaches to individual contexts and using co-production to work in partnership with clinical providers and researchers.
- The limited evidence of effectiveness for many falls prevention activities. It may be better to focus on disinvestment in some of these activities to focus on stronger evidence-based interventions such as structured patient education.
- The challenges of falls prevention in people living with dementia.

Following on from the workshop, the Victorian Falls Prevention Alliance was developed, which includes representation from consumers, clinicians, researchers, managers and policy makers across Victoria, and is supported and administered by the three Victorian Research Translation Centres (Western Alliance, MACH and MP).

RESEARCH CAPABILITY BUILDING

Western Alliance plays a key role in developing research capability within western Victorian healthcare settings. In addition to our research funding and support, we also offer a comprehensive training program through our STaRR (Supporting Translation of Research in Rural and Regional settings) initiative. The STaRR program

commenced in late 2020 with support from the Victorian Department of Health.

The program was informed by a comprehensive scoping exercise, which included a systematic review of the research education literature and the Victorian Rural/Regional Research Training Needs Project. The key principles identified from this work were:

Research
Translation
focus

Organisational
Research
Culture and
infrastructure

Just in
time
access

Involvement
of health
managers

Mentored and
co-designed
training

Experiential
collaborative
and interactive
learning

Targeted at
various levels
of experience

Guided by these principles, we developed our comprehensive STaRR training and capability program for health practitioners in rural and regional settings. Training is targeted towards emerging health practitioner

researchers, as well as research translation mentors and health managers/leaders.

Key components of the training:

RESEARCH TRANSLATION MENTORS

- Identification of research mentors via expression of interest
- Provision of research translation training across 2 x online workshops

HEALTH MANAGERS/ LEADERS

- Identification of health managers/leaders via expression of interest
- Provision of research translation-focused introductory research training

EMERGING HEALTH PRACTITIONER RESEARCHERS

- Identification of health practitioner researchers via expression of interest
- Provision of translation-focused research training, co designed and supported by matched research mentors

During the 2020/2021 financial year, 27 mentors and 32 health managers and leaders participated in the program. Fifty-two emerging health practitioner researchers also signed up to complete the program in the second half of 2021.

We are thrilled with the interest in this exciting initiative and we would like to acknowledge the tireless work of our research mentors, training facilitators, and in particular our research capability building lead, Dr Olivia King, who oversaw the development and implementation of this program. The program is being formally evaluated as part of a research project funded by Western Alliance.

"The STaRR program is perfectly pitched at the emerging researcher with a great theoretical base shared along with opportunities to consolidate this learning with practical workshops.

This program has set our research team up to feel confident with our research question and has provided guidance as to our chosen methodology and data analysis method. I highly recommend this program".

STaRR Emerging Researcher Program participant

MEET OUR RESEARCH CAPABILITY BUILDING LEAD

Dr Olivia King,
PhD (Health),
Grad. Cert.
Diab Ed.,
B. Pod (Hons)



Tell us about your role?

I am thrilled to be the inaugural Manager of Western Alliance's Research Capability Building Program. The key focus of my role is leading the development of the STaRR (Supporting Translation of Research in Rural and Regional settings) Program.

I get to combine the two (work-related) things I love the most: research and education. I also get to work with an amazing group of passionate, dedicated researchers and educators to develop and deliver the program to practitioners working in the Barwon South West and Grampians Region.

I am currently working with a team of researchers to evaluate the STaRR Program. I am keen to understand what it is that makes research capacity and capability building programs successful and how to ensure that the impact is sustained beyond the duration of the program.

What is your advice for potential researchers?

Engaging in research as a novice can be daunting. We have never had so much support for emerging researchers in our region, so don't be afraid to reach out to your Research Translation Coordinator or your Allied Health Research and Translation Lead if you need help getting started or progressing your research. Research can be hard work but is incredibly rewarding and may open opportunities you never knew existed.

PARTNERSHIPS

Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative

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 occurs within the members of these centres, and the role of the Collaborative is to embed research into healthcare. The VRTCC has been tasked with contributing to the Victorian healthcare pandemic recovery through identifying priorities, supporting research and evidence translation, and improving outcomes.

Throughout the 2020/2021 financial year, the Collaborative has grown from strength to strength, overseeing a range of activities, including:

- The Victorian Collaborative Healthcare Recovery Initiative (VCHRI), which received \$800,000 from the Victorian State government to develop projects that contribute to the redesign and improvement of Victoria's healthcare system, driving recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic through research-led innovation. The VCHRI program of work consists of three pilot projects that have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on healthcare and the healthcare workforce. These pilot projects informed priorities for two larger collaborative projects which aim to 1) optimise the use of colonoscopy and eliminate low value healthcare practices, and 2) identify models of virtual care suitable for scale-up across Victoria.
- The Victorian Falls Prevention Alliance, Victorian Social Isolation and Social Prescribing Network and the Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Initiative (all outlined above)

We look forward to continuing our strong collaborative relationship with MACH and Monash Partners, to continue to improve the lives of Victorians through translation focussed research.

National Ageing Research Institute (NARI)

Following on from our collaborative Ageing Research Forum with NARI via their Melbourne Ageing Research Collaboration (MARC) in late 2019, Western Alliance has been working with MARC during the 2020/2021 financial year to identify and co-fund research projects based on the key priorities identified at the forum. Two projects were collaboratively developed and are being co-funded by the two organisations:



- Reducing patient sedentary behaviour in sub-acute units at Ballarat Health Services. Associate Professor Danny Hills (Federation University) \$50,000
- Feasibility and acceptability of the Digital Inclusion – Social Connections (DI-SC) Program. Caroline Gibson (Ballarat Health Services)

We look forward to following the progress of these two important initiatives and to continuing collaborative ageing research with MARC and NARI.

Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI)

During the 2020/2021 financial year, MCRI commenced 'GenV', a large scale project across Victoria centred around parallel birth and parent cohorts for long-term insights and effective interventional research. Through representation on the GenV steering committee, Western Alliance is actively supporting this program across western Victoria. Through the GenV program, MCRI are also partnering on the aforementioned Western Alliance Flagship Research Program - 'The Pregnancy Research and Translation Ecosystem (PRT-E)', led by Professor Peter Vuillermin. We look forward to the progress of GenV over the coming years and to working collaboratively with MCRI to improve child and parent health for our communities.

Spinifex Network

The Rural Health and Medical Research Network – the Spinifex Network – is a consortium and coalition of more than 50 rural and regional health organisations across Australia. Spinifex exists to:

- Improve access to healthcare that meets the needs of rural communities, through technology, workforce and innovative care delivery; and
- Increase support for sustainable rural communities by responding to the unique health challenges of place.

Victorian Ministerial Health and Medical Research Advisory Committee:

Through our membership on the Victorian Ministerial Health and Medical Research Advisory Committee, Western Alliance is playing a key role on behalf of our members in the development of the Victorian Health and Medical Research Plan. This planning process has also led to the recommendation for a Victorian Rural and Regional Health and Medical Research Plan. Western Alliance will continue to advocate for both the western region and rural and regional research more generally as part of this work.

Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) in Research

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. With this in mind, we are putting in place a range of programs to facilitate meaningful consumer and community involvement across our region.

During the 2020/2021 financial year 30 participants from our STaRR emerging researcher program and members of the Western Alliance Research Translation Committee participated in consumer participation in research training. The training, which was funded by Western Alliance and facilitated by the Health Issues Centre, gave participants a strong grounding to assist them in involving consumers in the co-design and undertaking of their research. Western Alliance is now setting up and supporting a regional CCI network, which will involve consumers and carers, health service representatives and researchers from across western Victoria.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In addition to consolidating, improving and sustaining the above activities, Western Alliance has commenced planning for a number of new initiatives.

- **Embedded Higher Degree by Research (HDR) program:** In early 2022, Western Alliance will open expressions of interest for scholarships for staff of our health partners, for study to be completed at one of our two academic institutions, Deakin University and Federation University. The program will aim to:
 - Improve research career development opportunities for health practitioners in regional and rural western Victoria
 - Increase research capacity and capability within Western Alliance health sector partner organisations
 - Improve collaboration between Western Alliance academic and health sector partners
 - Support the development of regional/rural, translation-focussed health sector led research to improve health outcomes across western Victoria
- **Victorian Clinical Trials Education Centre (V-CTEC):** In early 2022, The Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative (VRTCC - comprising Melbourne Academic Centre for Health, Monash Partners Academic Health Science Centre and Western Alliance Academic Science Centre) in partnership with the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre and Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, will establish the Victorian Clinical Trials Education Centre (V-CTEC). V-CTEC aims to build the capability of Victoria's clinical trials workforce through the

provision of high quality online training programs to all Victorians working in the clinical trials sector, at no cost to training participants.

- **Mental health grant funding round:** In early 2022 Western Alliance will open expressions of interest for its latest thematic research funding round. With the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated mitigation strategies, including lockdowns, on the mental health of our communities, as well as the recent release of the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, it is an opportune time to support translation focussed mental health research in our region. This grant round will allocate \$50,000 (split across up to two projects) towards solving a key problem, based on mental health priorities identified by our health sector member organisations and communities.
- **Annual Symposium:** After a second cancellation in 2021, Western Alliance looks forward to May 2022 to recommence our annual symposium. The symposium will provide a long awaited opportunity for our members, partners and communities to meet face to face and learn about all of the exciting research that has been taking place over the past two years. This will be an excellent networking opportunity for health professionals, researchers and consumers across western Victoria.
- **Strategic Research Planning:** As part of our STaRR program, Western Alliance will soon be facilitating support for our health sector member organisations with strategic research planning. This will commence with individual organisation gap analyses and follow on with tailored guidance for developing or refining their research strategies and plans.



Acknowledgments

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. This year has been particularly challenging on many fronts and we very much appreciate your continued dedication.

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

GRANTS AND FUNDING

Western Alliance would like to acknowledge and thank the Victorian DH and DJPR for their ongoing support of the Western Alliance, and in particular their recent contribution of \$167,732 towards our Research Translation Coordinator program.



Contact Us



WESTERN ALLIANCE
c/o SOUTH WEST HEALTHCARE
25 RYOT STREET
WARRNAMBOOL VIC 3280

03 4215 2900

WWW.WESTERNALLIANCE.ORG.AU
[MAILTO:INFO@WESTERNALLIANCE.ORG.AU](mailto:INFO@WESTERNALLIANCE.ORG.AU)

WESTERN ALLIANCE ACADEMIC HEALTH SCIENCE CENTRE

AN AUSTRALIAN-FIRST