



Academic Health Science Centre

2019 - 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

**Western Alliance Health Research Ltd
(Western Alliance)**

**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.



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ABOUT US

Western Alliance Academic Health Science Centre (Western Alliance) was established in 2014 and incorporated as a registered health promotion charity 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-living counterparts. The challenges that affect the health of people living in western Victoria include distance and major variations in access to healthcare, socio-economic status and infrastructure.

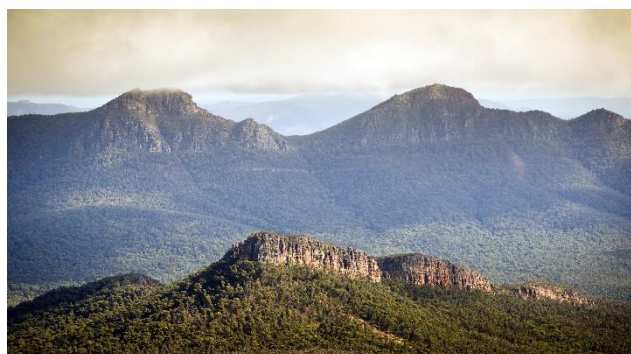
Targeted research strategies and systematic translation efforts spanning health services, academic institutions and regional boundaries advance the delivery of research-based and evidence-informed health care across western Victoria.

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 implement 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 30 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 solve the key health issues faced by our member organisations.



OUR TRACK RECORD

Western Alliance funded studies include:

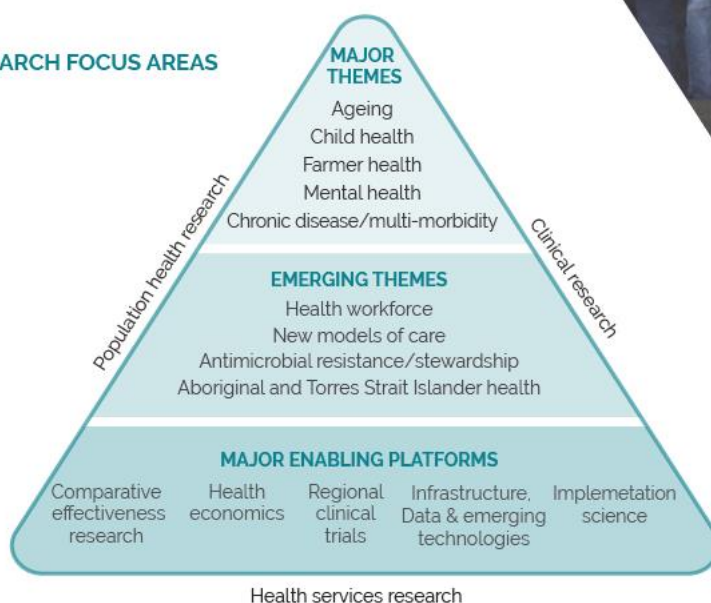
- Identifying barriers, facilitators and strategies for implementing cardiac tele-rehabilitation to address access inequalities in western Victoria
- What is the prevalence of malnutrition in a small rural health service? Evaluation of a malnutrition screening program
- Let's have a yarn about chronic 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

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 others industries & sectors

RESEARCH FOCUS AREAS



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: 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 PEOPLE

Board members

| Name | Position | Dates (if not for whole year) |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Professor Brendan Crotty | Chair/Director | |
| Dr Leanne Beagley | Director | To March 2020 |
| Ms Frances Diver | Director | |
| Mr Dale Fraser | Treasurer/Director | |
| Dr Sarah Leach | Director | |
| Mr Anthony Schinck | Director | |
| 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 | From February 2020 |
| Dr Michael Field | Research Translation Coordinator | From February 2020 |
| Dr Louise Greenstock | Research Translation Coordinator | From June 2020 |

Research Translation Committee members

| Name | Position | Dates acted (if not for whole year) |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| A/Professor Anna Wong Shee | Chair | |
| A/Professor Rosemary Aldrich | Member | |
| Professor Warren Payne | Member | |
| Dr Olivia King | Member | |
| Mr Drew Aras | Member | |
| Ms Barbara Moll | Member | |
| Mr Mario Santilli | Member | |
| Ms Susan Morrissey | Member | |
| 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 | |
| Ms Maureen Waddington | Member | |
| Dr Laura Alston | Member | |
| A/Professor Vincent Versace | Member | |
| Professor Alison Hutchison | Member | |
| Dr Michael Field | Member | From February 2020 |
| Ms Ashleigh Clarke | Member | From February 2020 |
| Mrs Jaclyn Bishop | Member | From February 2020 |
| Dr Louise Greenstock | Member | From June 2020 |
| Mrs Marilyn Dolling | Consumer Representative | |

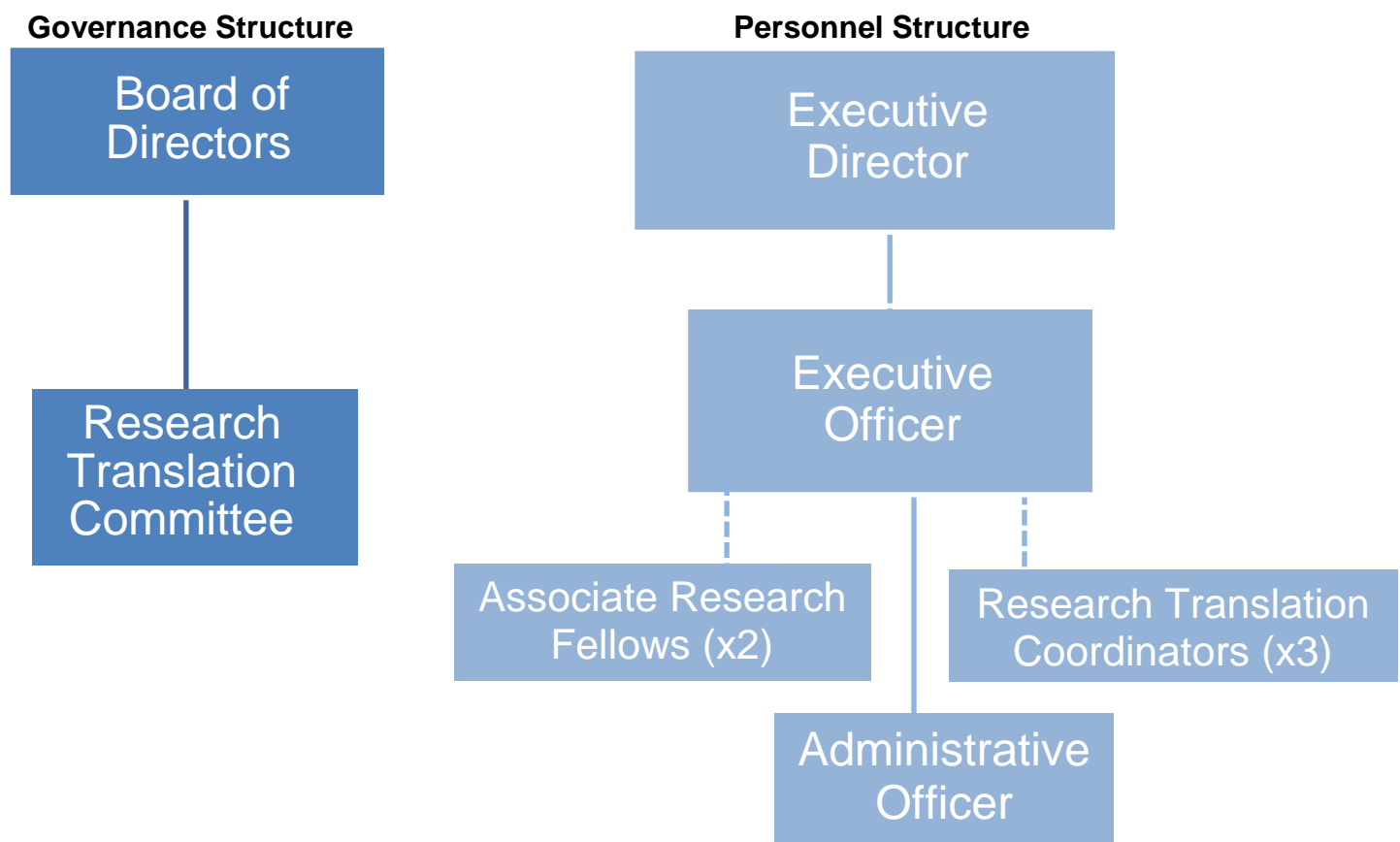




OUR STRUCTURE & MANAGEMENT

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 2020 financial year has been an extremely challenging time, with the bushfires, COVID-19 and the response to the pandemic significantly impacting Victorian communities. Our thoughts are with the families and loved ones of those who have lost their lives and those who continue to be affected by the measures put in place to control the spread of the virus and 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. Following a very successful strategic planning day in March, we have developed the **Western Alliance Strategic Plan 2020 – 2023**. The planning day was ably facilitated by Heather Wellington and Janet Cameron from Ngamuru Consultancy and there was wide representation from all Western Alliance member organisations, as well as health service consumers. A keynote presentation was delivered by Professor Christine Jorm, Executive Director of the New South Wales Regional Health Partners.

Western Alliance deservedly reached the interview stage in our bid for recognition as a Centre for Innovation in Regional Health (CIRH) with the NHMRC, but we were unfortunately not successful in being awarded accreditation. Whilst this outcome was disappointing, we recognise that the process of developing the bid enabled new partnerships to grow and has given health research in regional and rural Victoria a platform for future collaboration and collective advocacy. The work that went into developing the bid also gave us a useful platform to develop our strategic plan. As such, the new strategic plan has consolidated a stronger focus and direction for the work of the Alliance and has led to a number of new proposals, including a flagship research program, an emerging researcher grant program, a health service-embedded PhD scholarship program and advocacy for a Victorian rural and regional health and medical research plan, all currently under active discussion and due to be implemented over the next 12 months.

Although the pandemic has 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:

- Restructuring the Western Alliance board to include representation from all member organisations, and establishing the **Western Alliance Research Translation Committee**, made up of health practitioners, researchers and consumers from our membership. The Research Translation Committee was established to advise on Western Alliance operational activities and to provide a stronger feedback loop between the Alliance and its member organisations.
- Establishing three **Research Translation Coordinator** roles embedded within member health services. These positions support and develop translation-focussed research, assist with identifying and facilitating opportunities for collaboration and grant funding, and develop and deliver research capacity building initiatives. Funding for this initiative has been provided by the Victorian Department of Health and

Human Services, through a \$400,000 grant Western Alliance received from the Medical Research Innovation Fund.

- The **Western Alliance COVID-19 research grant round**, which attracted a total of 25 applications from collaborative research teams in the region. More than \$300,000 has been allocated to [seven translation-focussed research studies](#).

These studies will analyse the impact, management and outcomes of the pandemic across our region, and will also enable new ideas and innovations generated from the pandemic response to be harnessed to support our vision of healthier regional and rural communities.

- The positioning of Western Alliance alongside the two Melbourne-based Academic Health Science Centres, Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH) and Monash Partners, as part of the **Victorian Research Translation Centres Collaborative**, which has been awarded \$800,000 by the Victorian Government to undertake the **Victorian Collaborative Healthcare Recovery Initiative**, to develop and implement COVID-19 recovery research projects.
- The establishment of ageing and digital health **collaborative research hubs** in partnership with the National Ageing Research Institute and the Digital Health Cooperative Research Centre. Forums for each hub, held at South West Healthcare in Warrnambool and Federation University in Ballarat, brought together over 100 clinicians, academics, consumers, managers and policy makers to identify key issues in each focus area and to develop research questions to address these issues. Collaborative research projects across the region are being developed and will be funded to answer these questions.
- The commencement of our second **Western Alliance Associate Research Fellow**, Dr Laura Alston, whose two year research project 'Preventing chronic diseases in rural populations for future generations: The role of rural health services in guiding community efforts to improve the food environment' is now underway at Colac Area Health.
- The establishment of a program and for members to access Alliance **support for bids for major external research grants**, for collaborative, translation-focussed projects based in western Victoria.
- Facilitating and funding access for regional clinicians and researchers to **specialist research support** through the Deakin Biostatistics Unit and Deakin Health Economics.
- Working closely with the Western Victoria Primary Health Network (PHN) in building their internal capacity and capability to identify, support and collaborate on relevant translation-focussed research. The Western Alliance team has assisted the PHN in setting up the **Western Victoria PHN Research Committee**, as well as guidelines for their engagement in research. This includes a formal EOI process for external organisations seeking PHN support or collaboration with their research, which has enabled the PHN to increase their (and their stakeholders) involvement in research aligning with the PHN strategic priorities and community needs.

- Showcasing a wide range of research from across western Victoria and further afield at the **Sixth Western Alliance Annual Symposium** in Ballarat, with eighty five delegates attending on the day. Responding to the theme, ***'lost in research translation, demystifying the approach from knowledge into action'***, the symposium included twenty five oral presentations, four poster presentations, four keynote presentations, three workshops and a panel discussion.
- The establishment of the **Western Alliance Ethics and Governance Working Group**, which has overseen the streamlining of an ethics/governance fee structure across Western Alliance member organisations, and has identified and advocated for a range of improvements in rural and regional research governance processes. This group has also promoted Good Clinical Practice and Human Research Ethics Committee training across the region. Training programs facilitated by the Alliance have so far attracted more than 100 participants. In partnership with MACH and Monash Partners Western Alliance has also co-funded the appointment of a project officer to oversee state-wide initiatives to streamline research governance processes, through the **Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Group**.
- Initiating and coordinating the **Victorian Regional & Rural Research Education Scoping Exercise**, with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, and in collaboration with the Victorian UDRH (University Departments of Rural Health) research collaboration. The project's literature review and interviews and surveys across regional and rural Victoria are being used to shape Western Alliance's formal approach to research capability building, with a suite of programs due to be launched in late 2020.
- Involvement in the **Spinifex network**, an Australia-wide network of health, medical and community organisations dedicated to improving the impact of research in rural/regional settings. Western Alliance is a foundation member and has had a key role in its establishment and operations to date.

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.



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

OUR ACTIVITIES

Supporting and funding translation focussed research, building research capability and advocating for improved rural/regional health outcomes through research

Research Translation Coordinators

Over the past five years, Western Alliance has built a research presence across the western Victorian health landscape, with activities to promote collaboration, build research capacity, and ultimately fund regionally focussed health research. In our 2018 stakeholder survey, feedback from Western Alliance health sector members indicated that 'boots on the ground' support, particularly in sub regional and rural health services, would be critical to fostering engagement and driving both capability building and health sector led research. As a result, in November 2019, Western Alliance led the establishment and recruitment of Research Translation Coordinator roles, funded by Western Alliance and employed by and embedded within member health services.

The Western Alliance Research Translation Coordinator positions assist in building research capability across the western Region of Victoria by supporting research development and translation within Western Alliance member organisations.

Objectives of the initiative:

Build the capability of those working within the health sector across western Victoria to:

- Identify and translate best available evidence into their policy and practice
- Undertake research and evaluation in order to improve the health outcomes of those accessing their services, and to link with others (including other health professionals and academics) in these efforts
- Identify, apply for and be successful in obtaining grant funding opportunities to enable the above

By achieving these objectives, the program aims to:

- Promote a culture of enquiry and continuous improvement within member organisations
- Assist in attracting and retaining staff across the region
- Foster strong working relationships between the health sector and academia, and across different organisations within the health sector
- Work towards improved and more equitable health outcomes of communities and individuals in western Victoria

Three positions were appointed between January and June 2020 covering the Ballarat/Grampians, Barwon/Colac and Hamilton/Warrnambool regions as follows:

Jaclyn Bishop, B.Pharm (Hons), MPH,

Appointed as the Research Translation Coordinator for the Ballarat/Grampians region, Jaclyn is a pharmacist with experience spanning acute health, education, government and consultancy. She is in the final year of a PhD with the National Centre for Antimicrobial Stewardship (NCAS) and Melbourne University. Since commencing her PhD, Jaclyn has published several papers on this topic which have raised the profile of rural health.



Most recently, Jaclyn worked at Ballarat Health Services as the Deputy Director of Pharmacy-Dispensary & Quality Use of Medicines, medication safety and as a project manager with TOPCare Cardiology and presently with CELLIT.

Jaclyn commenced her role in January 2020, and is employed by East Grampians Health Service covering Western Alliance member organisations the Ballarat/Grampians region.

Jaclyn can be contacted via email: Jaclyn.Bishop@eghs.net.au or Jaclyn.Bishop@bhs.org.au



Dr Michael Field, MBBS, BA (Psych), BCom

Appointed as the Research Translation Coordinator for the Barwon/Colac region, Michael grew up on the Bellarine Peninsula and studied at Deakin University in Geelong before moving to Adelaide where he attended medical school. Michael worked as a junior doctor in South Australia in both city and country settings then returned to Victoria taking up a position in population health research at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute at the Royal Children's Hospital.

Michael's research experience spans clinical trials, cross-sectional studies and cohorts, and his research interests include childhood allergy and addressing rural health outcome inequalities. He also maintains part-time clinical practice in surgical assisting.

Michael commenced his role in February 2020, and is employed by Colac Area Health covering Western Alliance member organisations the Barwon/Colac region.

Michael can be contacted via email: MField@cah.vic.gov.au

Dr Louise Greenstock, PhD, PG Cert (Social Sciences)

Appointed as the Research Translation Coordinator for the South West/Western District region, Louise is an experienced researcher whose post-doctoral career began with a Research Fellow position at the Australian Health Workforce Institute at the University of Melbourne in 2010. In this role, Louise designed and led a number of research projects on topics related to health workforce, models of care, inter-professional learning, and health inequalities.



Louise has since worked on a wide range of academic and applied research projects and has a rich consulting portfolio, which spans the fields of primary prevention, harm minimisation, and health system redesign. This work has included developmental evaluation, research capacity building, mentoring and training roles.

Louise is interested in working with health professionals to identify ways to collect meaningful data and demonstrate impact on health outcomes.

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

Louise can be contacted via email: louise.greenstock@wdhs.net

COVID-19 Research Grant program

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Western Alliance has been able to offer a total pool of \$300k to support COVID-19 related research throughout the pandemic and recovery period. Phase 1 of this funding targeted research that would aim to manage or mitigate the effects of the pandemic, with phase 2 encompassing research that aimed to analyse the regional outcomes of the pandemic (both direct and indirect) and its management, as well as harnessing new ideas generated from the pandemic response. Funding was considered for projects being developed across clinical, health services and population health settings.

Objectives of the COVID-19 Research Grants:

- Support the work of our members throughout the COVID-19 recovery phase
- Identify and minimise any changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that have the potential to cause harm or adversely affect patient experience and/or health outcomes for regional and rural communities
- Identify and optimise any changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that have had or may have a positive impact on patient experience and/or health outcomes for regional and rural communities
- Optimise high value care across regional and rural western Victoria during and post the COVID- 19 recovery phase

PHASE 1

For phase 1, all Western Alliance member organisations, via their Research Translation Committee and Board representatives, were encouraged to identify existing research innovations that being developed to mitigate or manage the effects of the pandemic. Five expressions of interest were put forward between 26th March 2020 and April 17th 2020. A COVID-19 research working group was established from the Western Alliance Research Translation Committee, and this group (comprising 7 members), reviewed the EOIs before making a recommendation to the Western Alliance Board for funding. Actual or perceived conflicts of interest were identified and panel members having a conflict of interest did not review the associated submissions.

One project was awarded funding for Phase 1 as follows:

Project: COVID-19 – Geographical equity in a pandemic – \$84,463

Chief Investigator: Dr Kate Kloot, Centre for Rural Emergency Medicine, Deakin University & South West Healthcare

Associate Investigators: Dr Tim Baker – Centre for Rural Emergency Medicine; Associate Professor Anna Wong Shee – Deakin Rural Health/ Ballarat Health Services; Associate Professor Vincent Versace – Deakin Rural Health

In 2017, with support from Western Alliance, the Rural Acute Hospital Data Register (RAHDaR) was developed to collate mandatory government-reported emergency presentation data from larger hospital Emergency Departments with episode-level

emergency presentation data from small rural hospitals – data that is not currently collected by government-level databases. Since its creation, RAHDaR has been used to provide regular hospital reports, and in numerous research projects and peer-reviewed publications. RAHDaR will now use the existing framework and governance mechanisms to provide agile and timely COVID-19 surveillance data.

This project will rapidly gather, synthesise, and share information on the epidemiology and management of both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 cases in rural western Victoria. This will enable health services to mobilise, reallocate and coordinate resources if the prevalence of virus becomes high, and ensure the appropriate treatment of all patients, in the event prevalence remains low. Geographical expansion of the RAHDaR footprint into the Grampians' region will also provide future opportunity to build research capacity in the broader region covered by the Western Alliance.

PHASE 2

Applications for phase 2 opened on 17th April 2020 and closed on 11th May 2020. Twenty two submissions were received with twenty one of these meeting the criteria for panel review. A review panel consisting of seven members was formed, with six of the panel being able to review the submissions. Actual or perceived conflicts of interest were identified and panel members with a conflict of interest did not review the associated submissions. Reviewing took place between May 22nd and June 12th.

Western Alliance was very pleased to see the response across the region and the high standard of the projects submitted for review. We thank all those who took the time to submit an application, and congratulate the successful projects and investigators (see below). We look forward to seeing the impact of these initiatives across our region.

Project: Evaluation of telehealth services implemented for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the primary health care setting – \$49,993.60

Chief Investigator: Hannah Beks, Deakin University

Associate Investigators: Associate Professor Vincent Versace – Deakin Rural Health; Associate Professor James Charles – National Indigenous Knowledge Education Research Innovation (NIKERI); Fiona Mitchell – Office of the Executive Director; Associate Professor Anna Wong Shee – Deakin Rural Health/ Ballarat Health Services; Associate Professor Kevin McNamara – Deakin Rural Health; Dr Andrea Hernan – Deakin Rural Health

Project summary

To meet the health care needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* people residing in Djab Wurrung Country (Ararat Rural City and Northern Grampians region) during the COVID-19 pandemic, Budja Budja Aboriginal Cooperative (BBAC – an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation – ACCHO) has had to respond rapidly by modifying the delivery of health care services. This has involved a shift to telehealth (videoconferencing and phone) consultations to meet physical distancing requirements. The delivery of other clinical services, such as the Tulkulwan Wininn mobile clinic and face-to-face health consults at the BBAC fixed clinic, have also been modified. This shift also occurred within primary health care centres across Australia, requiring a temporary restructure of the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) to accommodate changes in health service delivery under the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. This project will evaluate the implementation and impacts of telehealth services for Aboriginal people accessing primary health care services through BBAC.

This will be undertaken concurrently with the participatory evaluation of the BBAC Tulkulan Wininn mobile clinic.

Ethical approval will be sought through an amendment (DUHREC 2019-432), allowing for a prompt commencement of research activities. This has the support of the BBAC leadership and is invaluable to examining the impacts and uptake of different models of primary health care for Aboriginal people.

Methods of data collection for the telehealth evaluation will include quantitative data (e.g. Non-identifiable clinical data and practice data), qualitative data (e.g. interviews with health professionals and Aboriginal patients with support from BBAC), and cost data.

*the term 'Aboriginal' has been used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. No disrespect is intended

Project: Mental health at the COVID-19 frontline: An assessment of distress, anxiety and coping from staff and attendees at screening clinics – \$30,000

Chief Investigator: Prof Susan Brumby – Western District Health Service

Associate Investigators: Dr Muhammad Aziz Rahman – Federation University; Dr Dale Ford – Western District Health Service; Professor Wendy Cross – Federation University; Dr Nic Van Zyl – South West Healthcare/Deakin University; Dr Grace Sousa – South West Healthcare; Ms Lorraine Hedley – Western District Health Service

Project summary

As the COVID-19 pandemic reached Australia, new methods to minimise the viral spread were required – social isolation, COVID-19 screening and protective clothing in specific healthcare settings. Government restrictions resulted in social, economic, and health consequences affecting our health seeking behaviours and the manner of our interactions with healthcare workers. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with mental illness, and the general population has been exacerbated by fear, self-isolation and stigma. Across Western Victoria, the COVID-19 response has included drive-through screening and respiratory assessment clinics (RAC). People seeking COVID-19 screening are met with healthcare workers fully donned in gowns, gloves and masks which may threaten people already experiencing distress, as well as hampering communication to the general population. This research study 'Mental health at the COVID-19 frontline' will assess psychological distress, anxiety and coping strategies from two regional screening sites: A drive-through screening clinic based at Western District Health Service, Hamilton and a Respiratory Assessment Clinic with prior phone screening at South West Healthcare.

Attendees and healthcare workers at both sites will be requested to complete a structured, validated and anonymous online questionnaire to assess distress, anxiety and coping strategies. The experience of frontline healthcare workers will be further explored through focus group discussions. COVID-19 screening is to continue and be part of the recovery phase. This project will provide insight into possible mitigations and new working practices that will benefit mental health in these frontline interactions for both attendees and healthcare workers.

Project: Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Ballarat and Western Victoria healthcare systems to inform future preparedness: a mixed methods study – \$42,580

Chief Investigators: Dr Rob Commons, Dr David Lister and Sharon Sykes, Ballarat Health Services

Associate Investigators: Dr Caroline Bartolo – Ballarat Health Services/St John of God Ballarat; Dr Raquel Cowan – Ballarat Health Services/St John of God Ballarat; Laura Martin – Western Victoria Primary Health Network; Dr Vince Russell – St John of God Ballarat; Dr Chris Preston – Western Health/Ballarat Health Services; Professor John Yearwood – Deakin University; Associate Professor Andrew Stranieri – Federation University; Dr Paul Perversi – Deakin University

Project Summary

The emergence of the COVID-19 threat with its profound impact on society further changed the context of health service delivery in the Ballarat, Geelong and Western region. It has had wide-ranging impacts upon individual sufferers, their caregivers, the healthcare system and broader society. Rapid adaptations have been made to the Ballarat healthcare network including the introduction of fever screening clinics, reductions in elective surgery, reallocation of public and private patients between hospitals, restrictions on hospital visitors, and increased numbers of patients requiring isolation while undergoing COVID- 19 testing. This study aims to: a) Investigate the impacts of the pandemic on patient outcomes and the overall healthcare network by investigating changes to the number of patients presenting to general practitioners and hospitals, being admitted to hospital and undergoing surgery.

Assess whether outcomes of patients admitted to hospital or tested for COVID-19 were impacted, for example by changing the amount of time they were admitted or before they were transferred to other healthcare facilities, or leading to more severely unwell patients or deaths, b) determine the themes identified by key stakeholders in the Ballarat hospital COVID-19 pandemic response that can be used to inform future operational, support, and patient care interventions, to improve the Ballarat region's preparedness for and response to the current COVID-19 pandemic, both in its current recovery phase and through future possible escalations, and c) find a shared vision on how to reactivate regional Western Victoria's healthcare following the pandemic through group reasoning and critical realists (CR) approaches.

Project: 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 – \$10,500

Chief Investigator: Dr Peter Eastman – Barwon Health

Associate Investigators: Anna Dowd – Barwon Health; Jacqui White – Barwon Health; Matthew Ely – Barwon Health; Jill Carter – Barwon Health

Project summary

In recent years the use of telehealth has been promoted across healthcare settings including palliative care. The advantages for both patients and health services are numerous including improved access to care for frail and remote patients, improved

access to multi-disciplinary specialist staff and cost savings.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought the use of telehealth to the fore, as public health approaches such as social distancing and isolation have meant many people have been unable to interact directly with health care professionals (HCP). For community-based palliative care services this has meant a sudden and dramatic change in practice away from a predominantly face-to-face model of care to one that significantly incorporates telehealth. While Australia has largely avoided the tragic scenes we have witnessed overseas, it seems likely that future healthcare provision will not be “business as usual” but rather a blended model involving both direct and indirect contact with HCP. As such, understanding how palliative care patients and HCP have experienced telehealth during the COVID-19 crisis and how telehealth compares to more traditional face-to-face care will be crucial in planning community palliative care services moving forward.

This planning is crucial because no one knows what the future holds including if/when a similar situation might arise again. The aim of the current study therefore is to evaluate palliative care patient and health professional satisfaction with telehealth in the context of the sudden changes caused by COVID-19 and investigate preferences around what modes of service delivery people feel work best.

Project: Investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and wellbeing of staff in rural health services – \$43,676

Chief Investigator: Dr Michael Field – Colac Area Health

Associate Investigators: Associate Professor Anna Wong Shee – Deakin Rural Health/ Ballarat Health Services; Dr Laura Alston – Deakin University/Colac Area Health; Associate Professor Vincent Versace – Deakin Rural Health; Dr Anton Issacs – Monash University; Dr Keith Sutton – Monash Rural Health; Dr Olivia King – Barwon Health; Dr Didir Imran – Colac Area Health; Tamara Holmes – Colac Area Health; Nick Sourlos – Colac Area Health; Fiona Murphy – Ballarat Health Services; Dr Jamie McGlashan – WorkSafe Victoria; Melissa Kennelly – Mildura Base Hospital; Lauren Zappa – Royal Flying Doctor Service Victoria

Project summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global health emergency, resulting in enormous pressure on health systems and health-service staff across the world. To the best of our knowledge, no evidence yet exists on the impacts of the crisis on the health and wellbeing of rural health service staff. In the Australian context, rural health services play an integral role in their communities, contributing to community strength and sustainability. As a result, negative impacts on the wellbeing of health service staff members could lead to wider and lasting negative effects across already vulnerable rural communities. This project is being driven by health service concerns for supporting the wellbeing of their staff. Anecdotally, there is increasing concern from health service executive staff about high stress and low wellbeing among rural health service workers, as a result of the evolving pandemic. Furthermore, retention of skilled healthcare workers is considered especially challenging in the rural setting under normal circumstances and the COVID-19 crisis may further negatively impact this underlying workforce vulnerability.

Using a repeat cross-sectional online survey and qualitative phone interviews, this study will investigate trends in staff health and wellbeing over time, in the context of trends in COVID-19 cases and government restrictions. We will explore the experiences of rural health service staff to generate recommendations for intervention and actions that will contribute to preserving the health and wellbeing of staff in rural health services in Western Victoria, Gippsland and Mildura. We also have support from WorkSafe and The Royal Flying Doctors Service.

Project: Evaluation of the expansion of telehealth through primary care in Australia – \$48,500

Chief Investigator: Professor Anna Peeters, Deakin University

Associate Investigators: Elizabeth Manias – Deakin University; Kevin McNamara – Deakin Rural Health; Vincent Versace – Deakin Rural Health; Andrea Hernan- Deakin Rural Health; Martin Hensher – Deakin University; Marj Moodie – Deakin University; Lan Gao – Deakin University; Liliana Orellana – Deakin University; Laura Martin – Western Victoria Primary Health Network; Andrea Driscoll – Deakin University; Bodhil Rasmussen – Deakin University/Western Health; Peter Vuillermin – Barwon Health/Deakin University; Jaclyn Bishop – East Grampians Health Service; Kate Anderson – Deakin University; Andrew Sanigorski – Kardinia Health/Deakin University

Project summary

In Australia, access to telehealth consultations through primary care has been limited. With many Australians disadvantaged by distance or lack of capacity to easily leave the house, there has been a long recognised need to shift to greater use of telehealth. As a response to COVID-19, the Federal Government initially opened up a Medicare item for selected telehealth consultations for those requiring COVID-19 isolation in early March, and has now moved to offer much wider rebates on telehealth consultations. This unique situation provides an opportunity to evaluate a model of broad access to telehealth for primary Care. The Institute for Health Transformation and its partners have the capacity to assess this change in health care delivery across the key areas requiring evaluation: quality of care, efficiency of service, equity of access, patient outcomes, patient experience, health worker experience, and health costs.

The Board and members of Western Alliance would also like to convey a warm thank-you to all reviewers who generously volunteered their time and expertise this year. Your commitment helps us to maintain a high standard and ensures a fair and equitable process for all applicants. We are most grateful for your support.

Victorian Collaborative Healthcare Recovery Initiative

The three Victorian Research Translation Centres, the Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH), Monash Partners and Western Alliance, have formed a collaborative to research and translate evidence to improve the health of Victorians.

The Department of Health and Human Services is currently pursuing A whole of Victorian Government COVID-19 system reform and recovery plan, to prevent and mitigate adverse consequences of the pandemic, restoring systems and services, and reform and improve system performance and sustainability

The Victorian Collaborative Healthcare Recovery Initiative proposal was awarded \$800,000 within the Government's \$8 million funding announcement for research relating to the impacts of COVID-19.

Under the direction of a collaborative Executive Committee and a Project Steering Committee, we will undertake commissioned projects determined by community, health service and government priorities, to restore systems and services, and improve system performance, informed by the Learning Health System framework. Identified priorities for research include virtual care, high value/low value care, and health workforce. The committees will also work together to position the state-wide collaboration for future partnership and impact opportunities.

Ageing Research Forum

In an exciting new partnership, Western Alliance joined forces with the Melbourne Ageing Research Collaboration (MARC) to improve health outcomes across western Victoria through targeted ageing research initiatives. Led by the National Ageing Research Institute (NARI), MARC is a unique consortium of partners, bringing together health and aged care services, universities, research and advocacy organisations, and the broader community to improve the lives of older people through the rapid translation of research.



The partnership was launched through the western Victorian Ageing Research Forum, which was held at South West Healthcare in Warrnambool on September 6th 2019. The forum saw over 40 passionate health professionals, consumers, researchers and policy makers gather to identify the key regional issues in ageing and to generate potential research ideas to address these issues.

To set the scene, keynote presentations were delivered by three industry experts; Professor Briony Dow (NARI), Professor Alison Hutchinson (Deakin University) and Professor Colette Browning (Federation University). Through robust discussion in several workshops, participants identified a number of key themes for ageing research in the region, which included:

- Workforce (Attraction, retention and development)
- Service gaps, access, data and information sharing
- Isolation & mental health, Ageism and identity
- Chronic disease and multimorbidity in ageing
- Models of care for people with dementia & cognitive decline,
- Choice (person centred care) vs risk

An aging research steering committee was established to oversee the development and co-funding (up to \$100,000 between Western Alliance and MARC) of research projects stemming from this initiative. Development of these research projects was delayed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in shifting priorities and logistical barriers (due to social distancing regulations) to conducting this research. Proposed ageing research initiatives are now set to be finalised by late 2020.

Digital Health Research Forum



In collaboration with our friends at the Digital Health Cooperative Research Centre and Federation University, Western Alliance facilitated the Digital Health Research Forum, which took place on 14th February 2020 at Federation University, Mt Helen Campus, Ballarat.

The aims of the forum were to:

- Establish the Western Alliance Digital Health Research Hub; a collaboration of health professionals, researchers, consumers and industry experts who will help to set the agenda for digital health research in western Victoria
- Bring our stakeholders up to date on current developments and evidence in the digital health space
- Identify key issues and gaps in digital health across the western region of Victoria, and
- Identify key research questions that can be further developed and funded to improve health outcomes

The forum involved a mix of presentations and workshops in an interactive format, which included the following guest speakers:

- Mr Neville Board, Chief Digital Health Officer at the Department of Health and Human Services
- Professor Tim Shaw, Professor of eHealth and Director of the Research in Implementation Science and eHealth Group (RISe) in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Sydney
- Dr Isobel Frean, Senior Consultant at Digital Health CRC
- Professor James Boyd, Chair of Digital Health at LaTrobe University
- Professor Rajesh Vasa, Head Translational Research of Deakin University's A2I2 Institute

Allocation of funding and development of digital health research projects has been delayed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative is expected to be progressed in late 2020.



Support for major external research grants

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

By supporting Western Alliance member organisations with these major external grants bids, we are increasing the probability of important translation-focussed research being

conducted throughout the western region of Victoria. This provides a platform for our members to collaborate and also gives Western Alliance members an opportunity to influence the direction of major research projects on behalf of their collective stakeholders and communities. 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)

Biostatistics and Health Economics support

Feedback from our member health services, and 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. With Deakin University having significant expertise in these areas, Western Alliance has developed and funded an initiative to enable health sector based researchers to access this support.

Piloting of the program commenced in March 2020, with researchers accessing biostatistics support via our research translation coordinator roles. Health economics support was made available through the same process in June 2020. The program will be offered widely across Western Alliance member health services and PHN from late 2020.

Research Capability Building Scoping Exercise

Through funding from the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and in collaboration with the Victorian University Departments of Rural Health (UDRH), Western Alliance has coordinated a scoping exercise to determine the best approach to building the research capability of our rural and regional health workforce.

This exercise incorporates three approaches:

1. Realist synthesis review of the literature (partially complete – working towards publication)
2. The Victorian Rural and Regional Research Education Training Needs Project (complete)
3. The Victorian Rural and Regional Research Training Survey (survey developed and ethics approved – data collection postponed due to COVID-19).

The results to date have been summarised, and from these, the following guiding principles for development of capability building initiatives have been identified:

a) Key principles for developing and implementing research capability building initiatives in health settings:

1. Enhanced research translation (RT) and improved health outcomes are at the centre of all program activities
2. A regional approach, which supports the development of positive organisational research culture and supportive infrastructure, enables individuals to apply their research knowledge and skills
3. Existing infrastructure, including physical and technological as well as individuals with research experience and expertise, is identified, strengthened and where possible, opportunities to share these resources across the region, are maximised
4. Opportunities for all researchers (novice to experienced), to develop their research and translation skills through ongoing engagement with Western Alliance will enhance sustainability
5. All new and emerging researchers (from novice level to those with research experience) have *just-in-time* access to a range of quality resources and opportunities to advance their research skills and apply these in practice
6. Health organisation managers have an integral role in enabling research and facilitating the translation of research into practice, and are therefore engaged in collaborative education design, participation in RT training and program evaluation

b) Key principles to guide the development of a research training component:

1. A mentored training program is essential to support research education participants as they continue to develop and apply their research knowledge and skills in their health organisation
2. The content of research education sessions may not meet all of the research knowledge requirements of all participants; rather the education component provides the foundation skills required to get started and provides a research pathway
3. Health organisation managers are offered tailored RT training within a similar timeframe as the practitioners, ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to support research and RT within their organisations
4. RT framework(s) will provide the basis upon which the research education is developed and delivered, ensuring that all research activities are designed with translation into practice firmly in mind
5. Research education is provided in an experiential learning format, in a safe and social environment which fosters peer learning and interactions
6. Eligible research education participants are required to identify a research idea that emanates from a problem identified in their health setting, is supported by their organisation and will be addressed collaboratively by a research team

The above principles are being used in the development of the Western Alliance research capability building program, due to be launched in late 2020.

Ethics and Governance Working Group

Research ethics and governance is often cited as a major barrier to those in health settings initiating and pursuing research activities, particularly in rural and regional areas.

In December 2019, Western Alliance convened an ethics and governance working group comprised of its member health services and university partners across western Victoria. This group has been meeting frequently to identify issues in the ethics and governance space and collectively develop and implement improvements, including streamlining processes where possible. Membership includes representation from Research Governance Officers, Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) managers and researchers from across the region.

Work to date has included:

- Establishing a streamlined ethics/governance fee structure across the Western Alliance members
- Clarifying governance processes for rural health services and multisite ethical approval for regional services, and actively advocating for improvement via the DHHS and state-wide governance streamlining group
- Engaging University HRECs in discussion to clarify processes for hospital based research ethics requirements and to reduce the risk of dual HREC review
- Identification of training needs and funding and facilitation of Good Clinical Practice (GCP) and HREC member training

Further work is underway to address the following topics:

- Improvement of Quality Assurance (QA) review processes
- Establishment of a regional scientific peer review panel
- Research credentialing, honorary process and data management
- Streamlining of research agreements and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)
- Data capture and reporting functionality from Ethical Review Manager (ERM) software

This working group is also being supported by the State-wide Research Governance streamlining project officer role, a position co-funded by MACH, Monash Partners and Western Alliance, and feeding into the Victorian Research Governance Streamlining Working Group. Western Alliance will also be establishing the Victorian Regional and Rural Research Ethics and Governance Network, which will involve representation from across regional and rural Victoria to collectively address issues in this space.

The 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.

It also works to strengthen Indigenous health, build rural research capacity and increase rural prosperity. Western Alliance is a foundation member of the Spinifex Network, and has had a key role in its establishment and operations to date.

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.

Western Alliance 2019 Symposium



The Sixth Western Alliance Annual Symposium was held on October 24th 2019 at the Mercure Ballarat Hotel and Convention Centre, with eighty five delegates attending on the day.

The symposium showcased a wide range of research from across western Victoria and further afield, with twenty five oral presentations, four poster presentations, four keynote presentations, three workshops and a panel discussion. The theme of ***'lost in research translation, demystifying the approach from knowledge into action'*** sparked meaningful discussion on the best approaches to developing and implementing research into practice for the benefit of our communities.

A special thanks to all those involved in the organisation of the event, and to our keynote presenters (Prof Rachelle Buchbinder, Prof Stacy Carter, Anne McKenzie AM and Dr Denise O'Connor) and workshop facilitators (Prof Alison Hutchinson, A/Prof Andrew Stranieri, and A/Prof Martin Hensher) who generously offered up their time and expertise.

Thanks also to our Western Alliance symposium partners, Federation University and Ballarat Health Services. The full program booklet can be viewed via the following link: [Western Alliance Symposium Program Booklet 2019 final](#)

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In addition to consolidating, improving and sustaining the above activities, Western Alliance is also planning for an array of future initiatives.

Western Alliance Emerging Researcher Grants

Western Alliance had planned to run an Emerging Researcher Grant round in April 2020, however this was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is now being planned for release in October 2020. 12 grants of up to \$5,000 will be available to support early career researchers based in health settings across western Victoria.

Objectives of the Emerging Researcher Grants:

- Support work that benefits the Western Victorian community and addresses the strategic objectives of the Western Alliance and its member organisations.
- Support projects that will lead to applications for external grants or funding;
- Develop and strengthen the research culture within Western Alliance health sector organisations;
- Support capability building and staff development in research;
- Support pilot projects or projects where traditional funding sources are difficult to attract

Western Alliance Flagship Research Program

Western Alliance is in the process of planning a flagship research program, which would see the identification of an issue or issues relevant to all Western Alliance health sector partners and a program of research developed collaboratively to explore and address the issue/s.

It is proposed that a Western Alliance funded flagship research program would include the following principles:

- Address a priority problem for all of Western Alliance members across the region, ideally with a wider regional application
- Be embedded within member health services
- Include elements across the care continuum
- Involve consumer co-design
- Leverage external research grant funding (ideally Category 1 grants) such as NHMRC Partnership Grants or MRFF grants
- Leverage involvement of Higher Degree by Research students through involvement of our University partners
- Involve cash or in-kind support from health service partners and/or other key external stakeholders (e.g. State/Commonwealth Governments, Health insurance companies, philanthropy, health services outside of the Western Alliance membership)
- Have an implementation plan, and
- Have multiple outcome points so the results can be accessed and implemented continuously.

The flagship research program is due to be formally proposed to the Western Alliance Board in November 2020 for endorsement.

Auditor Independence Declaration Under Division 60 of the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* to the Directors of Western Alliance Health Research Ltd

I declare that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, during the year ended 30 June 2020 there have been no contraventions of:

- 1) the auditor independence requirements as set out in Division 60 of the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* in relation to the audit; and
- 2) any applicable code of professional conduct in relation to the audit.

CROWE WEST VIC



CASSANDRA GRAVENALL
Partner

Geelong, Victoria
Dated: 29 October 2020

The title 'Partner' conveys that the person is a senior member within their respective division, and is among the group of persons who hold an equity interest (shareholder) in its parent entity, Findex Group Limited. The only professional service offering which is conducted by a partnership is the Crowe Australasia external audit division. All other professional services offered by Findex Group Limited are conducted by a privately owned organisation and/or its subsidiaries.

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INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE MEMBERS OF WESTERN ALLIANCE HEALTH RESEARCH LTD

Opinion

We have audited the accompanying financial report, being a special purpose financial report, of Western Alliance Health Research Ltd (the Company), which comprises the statement of financial position as at 30 June 2020, the statement of comprehensive income, statement of changes in equity and statement of cash flows for the period then ended, notes comprising a summary of significant accounting policies and other explanatory information, and the directors' declaration.

In our opinion the financial report of Western Alliance Health Research Ltd has been prepared in accordance with Division 60 of the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012 (ACNC Act 2012)*, including:

- i. giving a true and fair view of the Company's financial position as at 30 June 2020 and of its performance and cash flows for the period ended on that date; and
- ii. complying with Australian Accounting Standards to the extent described in Note 1 and Division 60 of the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Regulation 2013*.

Basis for Opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with Australian Auditing Standards. Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the *Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Report* section of our report. We are independent of the Company in accordance with the auditor independence requirements of the *Corporations Act 2001* and the ethical requirements of the Accounting Professional and Ethical Standards Board's *APES 110 Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants* (the Code) that are relevant to our audit of the financial report in Australia. We have also fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with the Code.

We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

Emphasis of Matter – Basis of Accounting

We draw attention to Note 1 to the financial report, which describes the basis of accounting. The financial report has been prepared for the purpose of fulfilling the directors' financial reporting responsibilities under *the ACNC Act 2012*. As a result, the financial report may not be suitable for another purpose. Our opinion is not modified in respect of this matter.

Responsibility of the Directors' for the financial report

The Directors of the Company are responsible for the preparation of the financial report that gives a true and fair view and have determined that the basis of preparation described in Note 1 to the financial report is appropriate to meet the requirements of the *ACNC Act 2012* and is appropriate to meet the needs of the members. The directors' responsibility also includes such internal control as the directors determine is necessary to enable the preparation of the financial report that gives a true and fair view and is free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

The title 'Partner' conveys that the person is a senior member within their respective division, and is among the group of persons who hold an equity interest (shareholder) in its parent entity, Findex Group Limited. The only professional service offering which is conducted by a partnership is the Crowe Australasia external audit division. All other professional services offered by Findex Group Limited are conducted by a privately owned organisation and/or its subsidiaries.

Findex (Aust) Pty Ltd, trading as Crowe Australasia is a member of Crowe Global, a Swiss Verein. Each member firm of Crowe Global is a separate and independent legal entity. Findex (Aust) Pty Ltd and its affiliates are not responsible or liable for any acts or omissions of Crowe Global or any other member of Crowe Global. Crowe Global does not render any professional services and does not have an ownership or partnership interest in Findex (Aust) Pty Ltd. Services are provided by Crowe West VIC, an affiliate of Findex (Aust) Pty Ltd. Liability limited by a scheme approved under Professional Standards Legislation.

In preparing the financial report, the Directors are responsible for assessing the ability of the Company to continue as a going concern, disclosing, as applicable, matters related to going concern and using the going concern basis of accounting unless the directors either intend to liquidate the Company or to cease operations, or have no realistic alternative but to do so.

Auditor's responsibilities for the audit of the financial report

Our objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial report as a whole is free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance, but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with the Australian Auditing Standards will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of this financial report.

As part of an audit in accordance with the Australian Auditing Standards, we exercise professional judgement and maintain professional scepticism throughout the audit. We also:

- Identify and assess the risks of material misstatement of the financial report, whether due to fraud or error, design and perform audit procedures responsive to those risks, and obtain audit evidence that is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion. The risk of not detecting a material misstatement resulting from fraud is higher than for one resulting from error, as fraud may involve collusion, forgery, intentional omissions, misrepresentations, or the override of internal control.
- Obtain an understanding of internal control relevant to the audit in order to design audit procedures that are appropriate in the circumstances, but not for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of the Company's internal control.
- Evaluate the appropriateness of accounting policies used and the reasonableness of accounting estimates and related disclosures made by the directors.
- Conclude on the appropriateness of the Directors' use of the going concern basis of accounting and, based on the audit evidence obtained, whether a material uncertainty exists related to events or conditions that may cast significant doubt on the Company's ability to continue as a going concern. If we conclude that a material uncertainty exists, we are required to draw attention in our auditor's report to the related disclosures in the financial report or, if such disclosures are inadequate, to modify our opinion. Our conclusions are based on the audit evidence obtained up to the date of our auditor's report. However, future events or conditions may cause the Company to cease to continue as a going concern.
- Evaluate the overall presentation, structure and content of the financial report, including the disclosures, and whether the financial report represents the underlying transactions and events in a manner that achieves fair presentation.
- Obtain sufficient appropriate evidence regarding the financial information of the entities or business activities within the Company to express an opinion on the financial report. We are responsible for the direction, supervision and performance of the Company's audit. We remain solely responsible for our audit opinion.

We communicate with the Directors regarding, among other matters, the planned scope and timing of the audit and significant audit findings, including any significant deficiencies in internal control that we identify during the audit.

CROWE WEST VIC

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Cgravenall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

CASSANDRA GRAVENALL

Partner

**Geelong Victoria Dated: 29
October 2020**



SECTION 4**OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION****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 and Human Services, the National Ageing Research Institute (NARI), Melbourne Academic Centre for Health (MACH), Monash Partners, the Digital Health Cooperative Research Centre, Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) and NSW Regional Health Partners.

Grants and funding

Western Alliance would like to acknowledge and thank the Victorian DHHS for their significant support of the Western Alliance. As part of their Medical Research Innovation Fund, the DHHS awarded Western Alliance \$400,000 to support the following initiatives:

- The Western Alliance Research Translation Coordinator program
- The Western Alliance Research Capability Building Program
- The Victorian Governance Streamlining initiative



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