

Turning up

Toby Commerford has settled in to life in Adelaide as a geriatrician, father, and yes, a rock singer ...

GERIATRICIAN Dr Toby Commerford credits his mother with sparking his interest in the older members of our society.

“My mum was quite influential,” he tells the *MJA*. “She did volunteer work with old people and encouraged me to come along as well. We also had a very ancient lady living next door to us when I was a kid.”

Later he worked as a volunteer in a day centre for dementia patients in the UK, where he and his mother were living. But in the hustle and bustle of medical training, he forgot about how much he had enjoyed interacting with older people.

“In fact, by the end of medical school I was leaning towards adolescent psychiatry,” Dr Commerford says.

Born in Australia, but half-English, he returned to England to live with his mother, completing medical school at University College London in 2003. By 2004, he was back in Australia and training in Gosford when geriatrics came back into his working life. He’s never looked back.

“Most people think geriatrics is the least prestigious specialty in medicine. But those who do it are at the top of the job satisfaction lists.”

He and his Australian wife returned to England for 2 years of physician training, just in time for the British government to put a broad broom through the healthcare system.

“I couldn’t get a training job,” Dr Commerford says. And so, it was back to Australia, where he ended up in Ballarat, working under the supervision and mentorship of Dr Mark Yates.

In 2009 he was back in Melbourne doing a year of advanced training, but it was a terrible time for Dr Commerford and his wife, suffering the loss of their young son.

“It was very difficult,” he says. “Things happened that I couldn’t

help, and I was just miserable. Someone told me that Adelaide was a great place and I had good childhood memories of the Adelaide Oval.”

On such memories are big decisions based and Adelaide has been his home ever since.

Geriatrics challenges him every day, he says.

“They are always incredibly complicated cases. They have complex medical issues, webs of problems accumulated over years, like the world’s most untidy room. And, in a similar way to paediatrics, they are very vulnerable patients.

“They’re a very specific cohort, often vulnerable to abuse, often brought in by someone else. They present differently than other patients, sometimes with delirium.

“I have to use my brain every day.”

The healthcare system was not built with Australia’s oldest citizens in mind, Dr Commerford says.

“We’re rescuing complex people. Someone called it ‘salvage’ work. The system is so poorly designed for them – we’re salvaging them from system issues a lot of the time.”

Sometimes geriatrics are misunderstood by their doctors, he says, and others “scupper” their own care.

“There’s an under-reporting of their illnesses, because people say, ‘oh, it’s just old age’. There’s a distinction between the processes of old age, and illness. Old people get sick more often but it’s under-reported. Even though there’s an obvious, predictable sequence of events, they don’t see it.”

Although he is a consultant in geriatrics at the RAH, Dr Commerford is almost never there. These days he is the Head of Community Geriatrics, conducting home visits with a multidisciplinary team to the most complex cases. He is also a teacher at the University of Adelaide, and conducts monthly

outreach clinics in rural South Australia.

Geriatrics, he says, “can be dreadfully depressing sometimes, of course”. When it is, he gets through “by thinking that at least I dealt with something that few would want to”.

“It’s about getting reward out of your own fortitude. I turned up.”

So, what does a busy geriatrician with a young family do when he’s not looking after old people? Sing in a band, of course.

Dr Commerford is lead singer of four-piece original rock band Deflector. According to the band’s Facebook page “their sound draws from many influences including Stone Temple Pilots, The Pixies, Aerosmith, The Beatles, RHCPs and The Darkness”. Their debut EP “Dancing about architecture” was released in 2014.

“It’s a busy life and I’m pretty lucky,” he says. “I feel like I’m at a point I never foresaw I’d be at in my late 30s, early 40s. I’m getting stuff done – looking after two kids, working, writing, doing music gigs, recording.”

Does he recommend geriatrics to his students?

“Absolutely, but I don’t expect them to do it,” he says. “All I ask is that they wait until they’ve done the whole year – hopefully they’ll realise at the end of it that it was actually pretty good. That’s the beauty of my role. I can show them how different it is from their expectations at the start of the year.”

Cate Swannell

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Dr Toby Commerford

“It’s about getting reward out of your own fortitude ... at least I dealt with something that few would want to ... I turned up”

Around the universities and research institutes

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians has awarded the Neil Hamilton Fairley Medal, 2017 to **University of Sydney** cancer researcher, Professor Roger Reddel. The Medal acknowledges his contribution to the study of cancer in a 30-year career that has seen him break new ground in understanding the disease. Professor Reddel is a medical oncologist, molecular geneticist and an internationally regarded expert on cancer cell immortalisation. He is also Director of **Children's Medical Research Institute** (CMRI), Westmead, and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science. Professor Reddel's research focuses on how cancer cells can divide unlimited times. His goal is to understand the process in enough detail to develop treatments that can limit the growth of cancer cells. He has also discovered a mechanism called Alternative Lengthening of Telomeres (ALT) necessary for the continued growth of some aggressive cancers, including osteosarcoma, glioblastoma and pancreatic neuroendocrine tumours. He has also overseen the continued growth and success of the CMRI since becoming Director in 2007. Under his leadership, CMRI has established several new research units and has opened the state-of-the-art Vector and Genome Engineering Facility. He also established Cell Bank Australia, a one-of-a-kind national cell line repository to ensure the integrity of cell lines used in research. Professor Reddel is also the Sir Lorimer Dods Professor, Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney. He gained his medical degrees at the University of Sydney (1977), trained in medical oncology at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and completed a PhD in cancer cell biology in 1985. He has also received multiple fellowships to undertake postdoctoral research at the National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, USA. The RACP awards the Neil Hamilton Fairley Medal every 5 years to an individual who has made outstanding contributions to the field of medicine.

<http://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2017/01/25/roger-reddel-wins-neil-hamilton-fairley-medal.html>



Murdoch Childrens Research Institute's Professor Melissa Little has been named the new head of Stem Cells Australia (SCA) by the **University of Melbourne**. SCA is a national alliance of

more than 120 experts from Australian universities and research institutes seeking to develop innovative ways to harness the potential of stem cells. University

of Melbourne's Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) Professor James McCluskey said Professor Little will bring a wealth of experience to the role, with a strong vision to advance Australian science in this important area of medical research. "As an internationally-recognised leader in stem cell science across more than 25 years for her work in developmental biology, Professor Little is an excellent choice to help build on the achievements of Australian scientists in this area and facilitate research to enable the next phase of stem cell medicine." Professor Little has sought to understand kidney development and disease. Her team's breakthrough research growing mini-kidneys in a dish from stem cells won the 2016 Eureka Prize for Scientific Research. The discovery could lead to new treatments for kidney disease, a better way to test new drugs or even bioengineer kidneys for transplant. These are very long term projects that will take many years of additional work.

<https://www.mcri.edu.au/news/melissa-little-takes-lead-stem-cell-research>



Three **Telethon Kids Institute** researchers have been awarded funding from the Raine Medical Research Foundation. Dr Melissa O'Donnell was awarded a Raine

Priming Grant supported by the Jon and Caro Stewart Family Foundation for her project entitled "Alcohol-related harm in young people: developing a longitudinal evidence base", and named the Stewart/BrightSpark/Raine Project as it was ranked "outstanding" in the area of child health research. Dr O'Donnell received funding of \$187 128. Dr Ashleigh Lin received \$150 000 in funding for her project: GENTLE: The GENDER identITy Longitudinal Experience Project. She also received the 2017 Strachan Memorial Prize for her publication, "Outcomes of non-transitioned cases in a sample at ultra-high risk for psychosis: a medium to long-term follow-up study", published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Dr Lin will receive a \$5000 travel grant. Dr Laurence Cheung was awarded a 2017



BrightSpark Research Collaboration Award for his project, "Identification of novel drug combinations to cure high-risk infant leukaemia", and received \$8988.

<https://www.telethonkids.org.au/news--events/news-and-events-nav/2016/december/telethon-kids-researchers-awarded-raine-medical-research-foundation-funding/>



Professor Kate Loveland is the new Head of the Centre for Reproductive Health at **Hudson Institute of Medical Research**. An accomplished male reproductive health researcher, Professor

Loveland holds an NHMRC Senior Research Fellowship and leads the Testis Development and Male Germ Cell Biology Research Group in the Centre. Professor Loveland is also Head of Postgraduate Studies for the School of Clinical Sciences at Monash University, a role she will continue. Professor Loveland is a leading researcher in testes development. She is interested in understanding how in utero and early life events have an impact on the fertility of men, including as a pathway to understanding why the rates of testicular cancer continue to rise internationally and why IVF is needed for conception of 1 in 30 children born in Australia. Professor Loveland received her undergraduate and PhD degrees at Duke University in the United States, studying the molecular basis of mammalian fertilisation.

<http://hudson.org.au/professor-kate-loveland-appointed-head-of-the-centre-for-reproductive-health/>



Black Dog Institute researcher Dr Aliza Werner-Seidler has won a prestigious NSW Health Early Career Research Fellowship to investigate how e-mental health

interventions can be used in schools to prevent mental illness. In earlier research, Dr Werner-Seidler identified that school-based mental health programs can prevent or delay the onset of depression and anxiety in young people. In the first phase of this Fellowship, Dr Werner-Seidler aims to identify the barriers and facilitators to the school-based delivery of an e-health depression prevention program. These findings will then be used to develop a "best practice" implementation plan that is both effective and acceptable to students and the education system. Work on this project will begin in 2017.

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/newsmedia/newsdesk/index.cfm>

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Calendar of conferences in Australia and New Zealand

This calendar will be updated each month. If you have an event you would like to add, please include relevant details in an email to cswannell@mja.com.au.

The full version of the calendar is available online at www.mja.com.au

MARCH				MAY	
6-9	Trans-Tasman Radiation Oncology Group 29 th ASM, Auckland, NZ		Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, create a culturally safe practice, administer the PIP – Indigenous Health Incentive, Toowoomba, QLD	2-5	New Zealand Society for the Study of Diabetes AGM 2017, Dunedin, NZ
7	19 th Annual Meeting on Clinical Trials in Intensive Care, Noosa, QLD	25	Trauma Tasmania 2017, University of Tasmania, Hobart, TAS	5	Vitiligo Master Class, Sydney, NSW
8	Peri-Arrest, Transthoracic Echocardiography, Melbourne, VIC	25-26	Neuroradiology-Brain and Spine Interpretation 2017, Camperdown, NSW	5-7	QRME Ltd OSCE Intensive Examination & Communication Workshop: helps candidates focus on their communication skill, Toowoomba, QLD
8-10	Effective Management of Anaesthetic Crises (EMAC) Course, Wellington, NZ	25-26	New Zealand Association of General Surgeons 2017, Palmerston North, NZ	6-7	21 st ASM of the Australasian Musculoskeletal Imaging Group, Melbourne, VIC
8-10	Australian Healthcare Week 2017, Sydney, NSW	26	QRME Ltd Mental Health Skills Training: equip participants with the knowledge and skills to effectively assess and manage patients presenting with mental health concerns, Toowoomba, QLD	6-9	Australasian College of Dermatologists ASM, Sydney, NSW
10	International Medical Symposium, Melbourne, VIC	26	Obstetrics and Gynaecology Radiology 2017, Camperdown, NSW	7-9	Transplantation Society of Australia and New Zealand 35 th ASM 2017, Brisbane, QLD
11	2017 SPANZA PANNZ Update Meeting, Wellington, NZ	26-28	2017 Queensland AOA ASM, Noosa, QLD	8	Focused Cardiac Ultrasound TTE, Melbourne, VIC
14	The Australian Breastfeeding Association's 2017 Seminar Series for Health Professionals: Breastfeeding: positioning for better outcomes plus online webinar and special Australian Showcase options, Brisbane, QLD	26-29	12 th International Congress on Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (LUPUS 2017) and the 7 th Asian Congress on Autoimmunity (ACA 2017), Melbourne, VIC	8	CICM Fellow Education workshop, VIC
15	The Australian Breastfeeding Association's 2017 Seminar Series for Health Professionals: Breastfeeding: positioning for better outcomes plus online webinar and special Australian Showcase options, Sydney, NSW	29	A day with Dan Siegel: the new frontiers of interpersonal neurobiology, Newcastle, NSW	9	CICM Fellow Education workshop, SA
15-17	Sydney International Endoscopy Symposium 2017, incorporating the Westmead Endoscopy Symposium Nurses' Workshop, Sydney, NSW	29 Mar-1 Apr	Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases ASM 2017, Leura, NSW	8-10	RACP Congress 2017: Bringing specialists together, sharing knowledge, building skills, Melbourne, VIC
16	The Australian Breastfeeding Association's 2017 Seminar Series for Health Professionals: Breastfeeding: positioning for better outcomes plus online webinar and special Australian Showcase options, Melbourne, VIC	31 Mar-1 Apr	Urogynaecological Society of Australasia ASM 2017, Melbourne, VIC	8-12	Royal Australasian College of Surgeons 86 th Annual Scientific Congress 2017, Adelaide, SA
16-18	EMAC (Effective Management of Anaesthetic Crises) Course, Melbourne, VIC	APRIL		9-12	Australian and New Zealand Association of Neurologists 2017, Gold Coast, QLD
18	RACP Rise to the Challenge – Australasian Chapter of Sexual Health Medicine Annual Scientific Meeting, Sydney, NSW	2-5	Perinatal Society of Australia and New Zealand 20 th Annual Congress 2017, Canberra, ACT	10-12	Airway Management SIG Meeting 2017, Brisbane, QLD
18	The Australian Breastfeeding Association's 2017 Seminar Series for Health Professionals: Breastfeeding: positioning for better outcomes plus online webinar and special Australian Showcase options, Perth, WA	3	Paediatric Anaesthesia Crisis Management Course (PACMaC), Wellington, NZ	10-12	Australian and New Zealand Society for Geriatric Medicine ASM 2017, Rotorua, NZ
18-19	iHeartScan, Melbourne, VIC	3-7	15 th World Congress on Public Health: Voices, Vision, Action, Melbourne, VIC	12-13	Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists New Zealand Branch ASM 2017, Waitangi, NZ
20	Focused Cardiac Ultrasound TTE, Melbourne, VIC	4	CICM Fellow Education workshop, WA	12-16	Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists ASM 2017, Brisbane, QLD
20-21	Airway Management Beyond BASIC, Frankston, VIC	4-7	LIME Connection VII: The future of Indigenous Health Education: Leadership, Collaboration, Curriculum, Melbourne, VIC	15-17	Australian and New Zealand Addiction Conference, Gold Coast, QLD
20-21	New Zealand Simulation Instructors Course (NZSIC), Wellington, NZ	7	Nursing Emergency External Trauma Program, Melbourne, VIC	19-20	Australian Symposium organised by the Falk Foundation: Mucosal Microbiome and Mucosal or Systemic Dysfunction: Mechanisms, Clinical Manifestations and Interventions, Brisbane, QLD
22	Focused Cardiac Ultrasound TOE, Melbourne, VIC	7-8	2 nd International Lymphoma Radiation Oncology Group Educational Conference: Radiotherapy in Modern Lymphoma Management, Melbourne, VIC	19-21	General Practice Conference and Exhibition, Sydney, NSW
23-26	Australian Society of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery 67 th ASM: Ingenuity at work, Adelaide, SA	7-9	Spine Society of Australia 28 th ASM 2017, Hobart, TAS	20-21	Focused Cardiac Ultrasound/ECHO Workshop, Sydney, NSW
24	Crisis Management in Obstetric Anaesthesia and Neonatal Resuscitation, Sunshine, VIC	8-9	Neuromodulation Society of Australia and New Zealand 12 th Annual Scientific Meeting, Adelaide, SA	20-21	Neurorad 2017, Melbourne, VIC
24	Perioperative Ultrasound for all Anaesthetists: The Future becomes the Present, Melbourne, VIC	8-9	Rural Health West Annual Conference: Embracing the unexpected – the unpredictable world of rural health care, Perth, WA	20-23	Australasian Rheumatology Association and New Zealand Rheumatology Association Joint Scientific Meeting 2017, Auckland, NZ
24	QRME Ltd Advanced lift support: build participants' knowledge, skills and confidence when responding to rural general practice emergencies, Toowoomba, QLD	8-10	11 th Annual Update in Paediatric Emergencies 2017, Noosa, QLD	22-23	Australian and New Zealand Disaster and Emergency Management Conference 2017, Gold Coast, QLD
24-26	2 nd International Conference on Chest, Melbourne, VIC	9-12	2017 Australian Pain Society 37 th ASM, Adelaide, SA	24	FUSE Vascular, Melbourne, VIC
24-26	International Medicine in Addiction Conference 2017, Sydney, NSW	21-23	Trauma 2017 Conference: Bridging the Gaps in Trauma Care, Melbourne, VIC	26-28	College of Intensive Care Medicine of Australia and New Zealand, 2017 ASM: A gut reaction: ICU gastroenterology from beginning to end, Sydney, NSW
24-28	International Society of Ocular Oncology Biennial Conference and the RANZCO-NSW ASM, Sydney, NSW	21-23	Australian and New Zealand Society of Nuclear Medicine 47 th ASM 2017, Hobart, TAS	26-28	Australian Medical Association National Conference, Melbourne, VIC
24-28	Australia and New Zealand Society of Respiratory Science and the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand Annual Meetings 2017, Canberra, ACT	22-23	Focused Cardiac Ultrasound/ECHO Workshop, Melbourne, VIC	28-31	Speech Pathology Australia National Conference 2017, Sydney, NSW
25	QRME Ltd Cultural Safety Training: Developing positive, respectful relationships with	26	ANZCA Approved Anaphylaxis & CICO Emergency Response Workshop, Frankston, VIC	29-30	New Anaesthetic Registrars Crisis Management (NARCM) Course, Wellington, NZ
		28	Anaesthetic Emergency Responses Workshop (ALS/CICO), Sunshine, VIC	JUNE	
		29-30	iHeartScan, Melbourne, VIC	1-2	NSW branch of Australian Resuscitation Council and Take Heart: Resus @ the Park, Sydney, NSW
		29 Apr-2 May	14 th World Rural Health Conference 2017, Cairns, QLD	2-4	41 st ASM of the Australasian Division of the International Academy of Pathology, Darling Harbour, NSW
		30 Apr-4 May	Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists Conference 2017, Adelaide, SA		