Rounded life in rheumatology

Dr Sharmayne Brady combines research into back pain, clinical practice providing holistic care for her patients, and a balanced family life ...

Dr Sharmayne Brady is exactly where she wants to be.

At 33 years old, Dr Brady is an up-and-coming rheumatologist, partway through her PhD, mother to a 1-year-old, married to an Ob/Gyn, about to join a flourishing private practice, and enjoying every second of life. In 5 years’ time, she’d like to be the mother of two, with a finished PhD, and more clinical experience under her belt.

It’s a good life.

“I was always going to end up in a healthcare field,” Dr Brady tells the MJA. “I always liked the idea of making a meaningful difference in peoples’ lives.”

Halfway through high school she set her sights on medicine, and it was in her third year at Monash University that she settled on rheumatology as her specialty of choice, thanks to “great experiences with mentors” in the field.

Alfred Hospital. Shortly she will be joining a private practice in Endeavour Hills, in Melbourne’s southeast.

Also important to Dr Brady’s happiness is the ability to make research a significant part of her professional life. Her PhD, undertaken through the Alfred, is on the modifiable risk factors for back pain in women.

“Back pain affects just about everyone at some point,” she says. “The mechanisms involved are not clearly understood – why do so many people have back pain? Why are some people very disabled by it, and some people not?”

Back pain’s ability to stop someone in their tracks is infamous. Combine that with patient expectations about what doctors should do about their pain, and treatment can be a frustrating enterprise.

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Around the universities and research institutes

Three researchers from the Garvan Institute of Medical Research have received fellowships from Cancer Institute NSW to support their investigations into new therapeutic strategies for cancer. Dr Angela Chou was awarded an Early Career Fellowship. She is researching a new targeted drug in pancreatic cancer which, in initial preclinical testing, showed promise in a subgroup of tumour cells with specific genetic traits. Dr Chou plans to test this drug in a newly established model of invasive pancreatic cancer, and to explore its combination with different chemotherapies currently in clinical use, with the future aim of improving response and survival in pancreatic cancer patients.

Dr David Gallego-Ortega received a Career Development Fellowship to support his work, which focuses on making immunotherapies an effective treatment for breast cancer. Immunotherapies work by “re-educating” the immune system to recognise and combat cancer cells. In breast cancers, however, the immune system’s function is “dialled down” and immunotherapies can’t work effectively. Dr Gallego-Ortega’s work will use state-of-the-art technology at single-cell level to investigate how this happens and how to reverse it, so that the immune system can effectively target breast cancer cells. Dr Marina Pajic was awarded a Career Development Fellowship. Dr Pajic’s previous genomic analyses of pancreatic tumours identified a number of new genetic drivers of pancreatic cancer and this funding will support the preclinical assessment of several new drugs that individually target these drivers. A key aim of Dr Pajic’s work is to develop a more efficient strategy for the testing of new therapeutics that will accelerate progress into clinical trials, and ultimately lead to personalised therapy for pancreatic cancer patients.

Dr Anne Bruestle, from the John Curtin School of Medical Research at the ANU, has been awarded the Gordon Ada Early Career Researcher Award, and has presented the Gordon Ada Oration: Th17 cells in neuro inflammation: What we can learn from animal models of multiple sclerosis. The annual award, established in 2012 in honour of Emeritus Professor Gordon Ada, recognises early career researchers at JCSMR who have made major contributions to biomedical research. Awardees receive $1000 and are invited to present their work as the annual Gordon Ada Oration. The award capped a good month for Dr Bruestle who earlier was awarded $200 000 from MS Research Australia to develop new techniques to treat multiple sclerosis. The new project will look at how different immune cells interact with neutrophils, a type of immune cell that can combat infection by expelling their DNA to kill bacteria. The process known as neutrophil extracellular traps or NETs forms an important part of the body’s defence against infection. NETs can also mistakenly kill the body’s own cells, leading to a variety of diseases. Dr Bruestle said her team will look at how NETs induce neuronal inflammation and how new drugs could inhibit the process. The final stage of the project aim is to take the laboratory findings to patients and examine the level of neutrophils and NETs in the blood of people with MS.


Professor Peter Macdonald from the Victor Chang Institute has been honoured with the NSW Ministerial Award for Cardiovascular Research Excellence for his significant contribution to improving treatment for heart failure, in particular, identifying strategies to minimise donor heart injury, reduce transplant allograft rejection and increase awareness of organ donation. He also commits his time to his translational research laboratory for testing new strategies for mechanical assistance for patients awaiting transplantation and identifying procedures for minimising donor heart injury. Also from the Victor Chang Institute, Dr Joshua Ho has been awarded the NSW Ministerial Award for a Rising Star in Cardiovascular Research. Dr Ho is a computational biologist who has already made significant contributions to biomedical research. In his very short career to date, he has already made a great contribution to mentoring of four current PhD students.
Executive Director CMRI Welcomes Appointment of New Research and Education Precinct.

Foundation Chair of the Alfred Medical transformation of The Alfred campus as Alfred Hospital, Melbourne. Professor career in clinical practice including Professor Jennings has also had a long Member and chair of its Cardiovascular National Heart Foundation. He has had most recently as the interim CEO of the Children's Medical Research Institute. Professor Jennings served as the director of Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute in Melbourne for 14 years and most recently as the interim CEO of the National Heart Foundation. He has had a long association with the National Heart Foundation as a former board Member and chair of its Cardiovascular Health Advisory Committee. He will also remain active in his clinical and research activities. As a leading cardiologist, Professor Jennings has also had a long career in clinical practice including as the director of Cardiology at The Alfred Hospital, Melbourne. Professor Jennings also played a key role in the transformation of The Alfred campus as Foundation Chair of the Alfred Medical Research and Education Precinct.

Professor Garry Jennings AO has been named as the new Executive Director of Sydney Health Partners, an advanced health research and translation centre, made up of Sydney, Northern Sydney and Western Sydney Local Health Districts; the Sydney Children's Hospitals Network (Westmead); the University of Sydney; and nine affiliated independent medical research institutes, including the Children's Medical Research Institute. Professor Jennings served as the director of Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute in Melbourne for 14 years and most recently as the interim CEO of the National Heart Foundation. He has had a long association with the National Heart Foundation as a former board Member and chair of its Cardiovascular Health Advisory Committee. He will also remain active in his clinical and research activities. As a leading cardiologist, Professor Jennings has also had a long career in clinical practice including as the director of Cardiology at The Alfred Hospital, Melbourne. Professor Jennings also played a key role in the transformation of The Alfred campus as Foundation Chair of the Alfred Medical Research and Education Precint.

Wesley Medical Research has awarded 10 researchers specialising in the treatment and management of neurological diseases for their contribution to improving the care and quality of life of patients. The neuroscientists were awarded for researching new therapies and management techniques that may slow the progression of neurological diseases. Emeritus Professor Mervyn Eadie AO was presented with a Lifetime Achievement award for his work for over 50 years on the treatment of conditions like epilepsy and migraines. Dr Susanna Mantovani, who was recognised as one of the Emerging Leaders in Neurology Research, is comparing the sleep patterns of neurodegenerative patients with the healthy population to find ways to slow the progression of neurological diseases like motor neuron disease. Senior Research Fellowships were awarded to Professor Pamela McCombe, Professor John O’Sullivan, Professor Rob Henderson and Dr Noel Saines. Dr Richard Gordon, Dr Trent Woodruff, Dr Shyuan Ngo and Dr Frederik Steyn were awarded as Emerging Leaders in Neurology Research.

The University of Notre Dame has been appointed as the Director of the Professional Services Review (PSR), for the next 3 years. The PSR is an independent statutory authority that investigates whether health practitioners have provided inappropriate services that attract benefits under the Medicare Benefits Scheme. It also looks at whether medicines have been inappropriately prescribed under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. In doing so, the PSR plays an integral role in the regulatory framework of Australia’s health care system, to protect the integrity of both schemes. The Australian Medical Association has endorsed Professor Quinlivan’s appointment.

The University of Queensland’s new Centre for the Business and Economics of Health has opened its doors. Acting director, Professor Luke Connelly said the centre will lead research into cost-effective health care solutions, and connect researchers and resources from UQ’s Faculty of Business, Economics and Law, Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Mater Health Services and the Mater Research Institute. A donation from two UQ alumni – Fidelity Worldwide Investments Head of Australian Equities Paul Taylor and his wife Sue – kick-started the centre in 2016.

Doherty Institute postdoctoral scientist Dr Amy Chung was one of six recipients internationally and the only Australian, to be awarded a prestigious Mathilde Krim Fellowship in Basic Biomedical Research for her HIV vaccine research. The fellowships are presented annually by The Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), in honour of the organisation’s founding chairman, Dr Mathilde Krim, to support bright young scientists seeking innovative solutions to HIV and AIDS. Based at the University of Melbourne in Professor Stephen Kent’s laboratory, Dr Chung will use her Krim Fellowship, USD$150,000 over 2 years, to study the mechanisms by which different types of antibodies interact, with the aim of producing an effective HIV vaccine.

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Funded by the Mark Hughes Foundation (MHF), radiation oncologist Dr Mike Fay from the University of Newcastle has been named the inaugural recipient of a 3-year Hunter Medical Research Institute Mid-Career Research Fellowship dedicated to brain cancer. As a clinical expert in advanced imaging for brain tumours, Dr Fay’s research is developing scanning markers and targeted therapies for cancer cells that resist current treatments. Having trained in medical oncology before changing to radiation oncology, Dr Fay has worked in more than 30 hospitals across five countries, including the US and Germany. His research interests were sparked by a study aimed at predicting toxicity from radiotherapy – his paper won a prize from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists and was published in the International Journal of Radiation Oncology Biology and Physics. Along with collaborators, Dr Fay is studying high grade brain tumours that have oxygen-deprived (hypoxic) regions requiring three times as much radiation dose to treat. He believes that critical factors to treatment resistance will be found there.

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