

## Neuro research centre a first for NZ

New Zealand's first national research centre looking at the effects and rehabilitation methods for sufferers of stroke and other debilitating neurological disorders opened at AUT last month.

National Research Centre for Stroke, Applied Neurosciences and Neurorehabilitation (NRC-SANN) director Professor Valery Feigin spoke at the opening about the need for the country to gain a better understanding of the effects of stroke across all ethnicities and the best forms of rehabilitation.

"Society often perceives neurological disorders as lifelong but outcomes can and should be improved. It is also important to realise the majority of neurological disorders are preventable."

"It's critical to have well established interventions that both prevent and recover people with neurological disorders," he says. "The very nature of a neurological disability means that people don't have a loud voice, so awareness around the importance of early rehabilitation is low and public health support often limited."

Professor of Rehabilitation, Kath McPherson, who is associate director for the centre, is currently doing research funded by the Health Research Council of

New Zealand that aims to help that voice be louder, developing and testing of new approaches that are more responsive to the key issues people themselves identify as being most important to them.

Professor of Epidemiology and Neurology at AUT, Feigin has already played a role in major neurological research projects and recently led a groundbreaking review published in *Lancet Neurology* which investigated the worldwide incidence and outcomes of stroke in 28 countries over the last 40 years.

The National Research Centre for Stroke, Applied Neurosciences and Neurorehabilitation will conduct high quality epidemiological research and clinical trials to improve health and outcomes in people with



Professor Kath McPherson and centre director Professor Valery Feigin at the launch.

major neurological disorders such as stroke, traumatic brain injury, multiple sclerosis and dementia.

The opening was attended by Hon. Dr Jonathan Coleman, Associate Minister of Health, North Shore's Deputy Mayor Julia Parfitt, sponsors Cavit Rehab and Laura Ferguson Trust as well as representatives from health services, ACC, Stroke Foundation, Brain Injury Association, AUT and other universities.

## Research with a direct purpose



AUT University Nursing lecturer Grace Wong generates research to directly support advocacy programmes aimed at reducing smoking in New Zealand.

She has a particular interest in finding a voice for those that do not already possess one in this debate and inciting change.

"I use my research to support new and evaluate existing programmes in a drive to change peoples' attitudes to smoking."

Her work is supported by ASH New Zealand (Action on Smoking and Health in New Zealand), where she spends part of her working week doing research and policy analysis.

"To run successful advocacy

programmes you need an integrated and collaborative approach," she says. "My role at ASH helps me maintain important connections with industry and community."

Over the years Wong's research has looked at nurses and smoking, youth smoking and the effect of family members smoking around them, anti-smoking policies in universities and polytechnics, as well as the role ethnicity and sex plays.

"Smoking rates for Asian men are higher than women and certain ethnicities such as Maori, Pacific, Korean and Japanese smoke more than others."

To support change Wong has been

instrumental in the creation of a number of advocacy groups, one at AUT University and a second within the nursing community.

"There are some 45,000 nurses practicing in New Zealand and they have the potential to interact with the 620,000 New Zealanders who smoke," says Wong.

"If each nurse added a 30 second smoking cessation piece to their patient session, we could reduce the number of smokers in New Zealand."

The nursing advocacy group, with the support of the Ministry of Health, is well on its way to promoting a new 30 minute online smoking cessation training programme and other support material to assist nurses throughout the country.

A second advocacy group Wong is part of at AUT University has an equally ambitious drive.

"It is adding smoking cessation education to all first year health programmes and looking at a smoke-free campus."

"Not only are we doing our best to negate the rise in young adults smoking but we are providing our future health workers with the tools they need to help others."

The launch of the National Research Centre for Stroke, Applied Neurosciences and Neurorehabilitation was a recent campus highlight. About one in five New Zealanders suffer from stroke or other debilitating neurological disorders. As well as conducting research to improve health outcomes for people experiencing these disorders, the centre will raise the profile of this somewhat neglected field and advocate for a better deal for patients and families. Centre director Professor Feigin's part-time appointment at North Shore Hospital will help our local community benefit from centre expertise. Although local survival rates following stroke admission are good relative to the rest of the country, New Zealand lags well behind most other developed countries in service provision and patient outcomes. Much remains to be done and it is pleasing that this is becoming a Ministry of Health and DHB priority. Prevention is also important and work that AUT lecturer Grace Wong and others are doing to reduce smoking has relevance to stroke as well as to many other health conditions. It is humbling and rewarding to work with colleagues who have dedicated their lives to research and its application to make a healthy difference to the lives of others.



Max Abbott, Pro Vice-Chancellor, North Shore

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