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## A new service at the La Trobe Community Children's Centre will help preschoolers with ASD and extend our research: The Margot Prior Wing



*Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Ms Jenny Macklin, Chair of OTARC Advisory Committee Professor Margot Prior AO, Parliamentary Secretary for Disability and Children's Services, Mr Bill Shorten, and OTARC Director, Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake share their excitement at the launch of the new Autism Specific Early Learning and Child Care centre.*

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre is delighted to be part of the new national **autism children's centre program**. La Trobe University has been chosen by the Federal Government as the Victorian service provider under its new national Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (ASELCC) program.

**In partnership with the Royal Children's Hospital, the University will receive \$4 million over four years to develop an Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre, which will be co-located with the Community Children's Centre on the University's main Melbourne campus at Bundoora.**

Plans for the Centre were unveiled on 2 April, World Autism Day, by Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Ms Jenny Macklin and Parliamentary Secretary for Disability and Children's Services, Mr Bill Shorten.

Two other centres, one in NSW and one in SA, were also announced.

Minister Macklin said the new centres would draw together child care centres, universities and hospitals to develop best practice models of learning and intervention.



*Above: The front door to the La Trobe Community Children's Centre. All children, including the children coming to the new Margot Prior Wing will enter the Centre through this friendly front door.*

*Above Left: Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake, Professor Margot Prior and Bill Shorten MP watch as Jenny Macklin MP talks 'cars' with Jayden.*



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While at the current La Trobe Community Children's Centre it is business as usual, next door workmen have pulled down the disused premises of the old Children's Centre to make way for the new Margot Prior Wing, which will provide 20 full-time places for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It will begin operating in June next year, and will be the first in the State to provide early intervention programs for children with an ASD as part of a regular child care facility.

The new wing has been named after Professor Prior, who is the former Director of Psychology at the Royal Children's Hospital and Professor of Clinical Psychology at La Trobe University. Professor Prior is a leading specialist in family and child development and is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Melbourne. She also has an Adjunct Professorship at La Trobe University. Professor Prior is also Chair of the Advisory Committee of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre.

The new Centre will help reduce the overload on other early intervention services and make a meaningful difference to the lives of affected children and their families, particularly in the North and West of Melbourne.

**'The collaborative approach gives us an unprecedented opportunity to develop evidence based models, collect significant data and make a major contribution to understanding autism,' Ms Macklin said.**

La Trobe University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paul Johnson welcomed the Federal Government's support and acknowledged a contribution of \$500,000 by the Victorian Government towards construction costs. **'The University is strongly committed to the Government's agenda of increased access and participation by people from all levels of society.**

To view a short video announcing the launch of the new service, go to <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc/assets/downloads/Autism%20Launch2a.mov>

*Below—A considerable crowd came to celebrate the announcement of the new wing at the La Trobe Children's Centre.*



## Autism Research in Australasia: What do we know? Where should we go?

In April this year, we hosted a focused research forum which brought together leading Australasian autism researchers with the aims of identifying and bolstering current research strengths in Australia, of developing and planning future research directions, and for forging new Australasian autism research collaborations.

The forum was held at the La Trobe Technology Enterprise Centre at La Trobe University, **Bundoora Campus on April 6 and 7, 2009. The meeting was opened by La Trobe's Deputy Vice Chancellor- Research, Prof. Tim Brown** who welcomed the delegates to La Trobe University.

Delegates provided one-page summaries of their main research areas which were circulated prior to the forum, and the program commenced with each researcher providing an introductory overview of their research interests. The diversity of both research and professional expertise amongst the delegates was notable (occupational therapy, psychology, special education, paediatrics, epidemiology, and psychiatry), encompassing research that ranged from behavioral to biological studies, and basic to applied research.

A significant outcome of this highly successful forum was the formation of the Australasian Autism Research Collaboration (AARC). The next meeting of the group is scheduled to follow the Asia Pacific Autism Conference in Sydney in August this year

A report on the forum is currently being prepared and will be available to the delegates (now members of the AARC) and to all interested parties in the wider research and professional community.

The workshop concluded with the launch of an Olga Tennison Autism Research PhD Scholarship to be undertaken anywhere in Australia (3-years from 2010-2012).

*A full report of  
the forum will  
soon be available  
on our website.  
Watch out for it!*



*Researchers from Australia and New Zealand sat around a large table to share ideas and strategies.*



Director's  
Report



Since our last newsletter is the announcement of the establishment of the ASELCC Margot Prior Wing. This and the other Federal government initiatives that we are involved in provide increased opportunity for much-needed national research initiatives. I look forward to reporting on these in future newsletters.

*Cheryl Dissanayake, PhD MAPS*

## ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Chair— Prof Margot  
Prior, LTU, Melbourne  
University, and RCH*

*Associate Professor  
Cheryl Dissanayake,  
Centre Director, LTU*

*Professor Tim Brown,  
DVC Research, La Trobe  
University*

*Prof David Finlay, Dean  
of Faculty of Science,  
Technology and  
Engineering, LTU*

*Dr Catherine Maraffa,  
Senior Paediatrician,  
RCH*

*Dr Jacqueline Roberts,  
Clinical Lecturer,  
University of Sydney,  
NSW*

*Mr Clifford Picton, LTU  
Ombudsman*

*Professor Christine  
Bigby, School of Social  
Work, LTU*

*Ms Liza Boston, CEO  
Cracked Pepper Media*

*Associate Professor  
Amanda Richdale, ASD  
Research Reference  
Group*

*Ms Cherie Green, PhD  
candidate, LTU Student  
representative*

We have recently held our Annual General Meeting given the conclusion of a year since the establishment of the OTARC (June 2008 – June 2009).

Our achievements over this past year are outlined in our Annual Report, available from our website at [www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc/assets/downloads/OTARC%20AGM\\_AR09.pdf](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc/assets/downloads/OTARC%20AGM_AR09.pdf)

We have come a long way in one year, and we are confident that the next year will see even further positive developments within the Centre.

## Donations

To fund our research activities we rely on the support of private and corporate donors. Our thanks are extended to the individuals and organisations who have made donations to the [Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre](#).

**Your donations are vital.**

Donations can be made online or through mail and telephone. To access these options go to

[www.latrobe.edu.au/foundation](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/foundation).

Remember to specify that your donation is for the [Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre \(OTARC\)](#).

Please note that all donations to La Trobe University are tax deductible. If you need more information, please call (03) 9479 2497 or email

[otarc@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:otarc@latrobe.edu.au)



View or download a copy of our Annual Report from our [website](#).

The Olga Tennison  
Autism Research  
Centre 2009 Annual  
General Meeting —  
Our first year!



Informing community based professionals about autism is an important part of our role in helping promote awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorders, particularly the benefits of early detection and diagnosis.

As well as general awareness, the launch of the new Autism Specific wing at the La Trobe Children's Centre generated media coverage in April.

Articles included:

**'Raising Autism Awareness'** by Nyssa Skilton, Canberra Times, Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> April.

**'Advance on autism'** by Shaun Turton, Heidelberg Leader, 7<sup>th</sup> April.

**'Grant for autism'** Preston Leader, 7<sup>th</sup> April.

**'Early aid for young autistics'** by Shaun Turton, Diamond Valley Leader, 8<sup>th</sup> April.

**'Autistic kids get a place to call their own'** by Will Wright, Melbourne Times, 8<sup>th</sup> April.

Media Releases

Key role for new national autism children's centre program - La Trobe University - MEDIA RELEASE – 2 April 2008

Early intervention learning centres for children with autism – FACHSIA - MEDIA RELEASE – 2 April 2009

Podcasts

New Autism Specific Early Learning and Child Care Centre for La Trobe – LTU podcast - <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2009/article/a-new-piece-of-the-puzzle>; 8 April 2009

E-zines

A new Early Intervention learning centre for children with autism is planned at La Trobe University - *Help4Parents e-zine April 2009*

Early Days Workshops - *Help4Parents e-zine May 2009*

Feature Article - Social and Emotional Skills: Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder - *Yvette's Parenting ezine June 2009*

Radio Interviews

*Radio Therapy 3RRR, 5 April 2009*

*The World Today ABC on New genetic findings, 30 April 2009*

*With Natasha Mitchell on All in the Mind, ABC Radio National, Autism: Genetics, early detection and the ethics of screening newborns. - Sat. 16th & Mon. 18th May 2009.*

Links to all the latest media items are available on our [website](#).



## Tell them all about it!

Our Centre, Staff and students, have been busy presenting talks and conference papers. Six members of the Centre recently attended the IMFAR in Chicago in May (7-9).

Dr Richdale co-convened the first Sleep in Autism Special Interest Group at this meeting.

### Talks

Eastern Regions Early Years Meeting, Glen Waverley, May, 2009

**'Realising a Dream: Establishing the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre'**. RGSO Seminar Series, La Trobe University, May 2009

**'Meet the Directors'**, Talk in the School of Human Communication Sciences, La Trobe University, June 2009

### Publications

Barbaro, J., & Dissanayake, C. (2009, in press). Autism Spectrum Disorders in infancy and toddlerhood: A review of the evidence on early signs, early identification, and early diagnosis. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Paediatrics* (accepted May 2009).

Loesch, D., Godler, D., Khaniani, M., Gould, E., Freya, G., Dissanayake, C., Burgess, T., Tassone, F., Huggins, R., Slater, H., & Choo, A. (2009, in press). Linking the FMR1 alleles with small CGG expansions with neurodevelopmental disorders: Preliminary data suggest an involvement of epigenetic mechanisms. *American Journal of Medical Genetics* (accepted May 2009).

Richdale, A., & Schreck, K. (In press). Sleep problems in autism spectrum disorders: Prevalence, nature & possible biopsychosocial aetiologies. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, doi:10.1016/j.smrv.2009.02.003

### Conference presentations

Barbaro, J., & Dissanayake, C. **Prospectively identifying infants 'at risk' of an ASD in an Australian community-based sample: Results from the Social Attention and Communication Study (SACS)**. Poster presentation at the International Conference on Innovative Research In Autism - Tours, Loire Valley, France, April 15-17, 2009.

Barbaro, J., & Dissanayake, C. **Prospectively identifying infants 'at risk' of an ASD though the Victorian MCH Service**. Paper presented at the SA 2009 Growing Together Conference, Adelaide, 2-9 April, 2009

Barbaro, J., & Dissanayake, C. **Prospectively identifying infants 'at risk' of an ASD in an Australian community-based sample**. Paper presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research, Chicago, 7 - 9 May, 2009.

Chandler, F., & Dissanayake, C. **An exploration of the internal working models of caregiver attachments in high-functioning children with Autistic Disorder**. Poster presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research, Chicago, 7 - 9 May, 2009.

Dissanayake, C., Shembrey, J., & Suddendorf, S. **Delayed self-recognition in children with Autistic Disorder and Asperger's Disorder: Evidence for a temporally extended self**. Poster presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research, Chicago, 7 - 9 May, 2009.

Mifsud, J., Kelly, R., Dissanayake, C., & Leekam, S. **Symbolic play in high-functioning autism: How 'playful' is their play?** Poster presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research, Chicago, 7 - 9 May, 2009.

Newbigin, A., & Dissanayake, C. **Empathy in high-functioning autism: The 'self' and 'other's' perspective**. Poster presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research, Chicago, 7 - 9 May, 2009.

Malow, B., & Richdale, A. (2009, May). **Sleep – Special Interest Group**. Oral presentation at the International Meeting for Autism Research, Chicago, 7 - 9 May, 2009.

Richdale, A., & Robinson, A. (2009, May). **Parent and child factors associated with sleep problems in pervasive developmental disorders, Down syndrome and intellectual disability**. Poster presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research, Chicago, 7 - 9 May, 2009.

Dissanayake, C. **Promoting the early identification of ASDs**. Invited paper at the Royal Australasian College of Physicians Conference, Sydney May 18-20, 2009.



## Research News



### A visitor to our Centre

Dr. Kapila Jayaratne, MBBS, MSc, DCH, MD (Community Medicine) visited Dr Dissanayake at our Centre recently. Dr Jayaratne is a Visiting Academic undergoing post-doctoral training with the Centre for Health Policy, Programs and Economics at the School of Population Health, University of Melbourne.

Dr Jayaratne is a Community Physician attached to the Family Health Bureau, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka where he is involved with planning and implementation of a national level program for Children with Special Health Care Needs (CSHCN) which includes children with ASD. He came to Australia to increase his knowledge and to help him formulate new approaches for children with ASD in Sri Lanka. He visited us to discuss a means of promoting knowledge of ASD on this small but highly populated isle.

Research activities engaged in by staff include reviewing manuscripts for major peer review journals (e.g., *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*; *Autism*; *Autism Research*; *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*; *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*; *Child Development*; *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*), and grant reviews (e.g., United States-Israel Bi-national Science Foundation; Medical Research Council Grants).

As convener of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Reference Group of Autism Victoria, the Director organizes the annual Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Forum together with Assoc. Prof. Richdale, which is a one-day conference for autism researchers in Victoria. This will be held on November 10th this year. Together, we also co-review all submissions for this meeting.

We convene a once monthly seminar for research presentations by our students as well to view a series of invited distinguished lectures held at the MIND Institute at UC Davis, Sacramento (which are available on the web). We also have monthly laboratory meetings to share ideas and to foster our various research initiatives.

Participants are needed for our research projects. If you, or a family member, wishes to participate in research please email the Centre at [otarc@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:otarc@latrobe.edu.au) or phone 9479 2497. Many research projects need typically developing children as well as children with Autism Spectrum Disorders.



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### WHERE TO FIND US

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre is situated in a purpose-built child-friendly research facility in the School of Psychological Science (George Singer Building).  
Bundoora Campus  
La Trobe University