



The Governor visits

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OTARC Director, Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake was delighted to meet the Governor of Victoria, **Professor David de Kretser, A.C.** and show him around the site of the new Autism Specific Learning and Care Centre: the Margot Prior Wing, when he visited La Trobe University in late November 2009. Pictured above, Cheryl explains features of the new centre to Professor de Kretser and the **University's Chancellor, Mrs Sylvia Walton AO.**

Developments at The Margot Prior Wing



*The Margot Prior Wing building project has begun!
We watch the progress with growing excitement about the Early Intervention that will soon be available to preschoolers from Northern and Western metropolitan Melbourne. Everything is muddy or dusty, depending on the weather, but at last we are underway.*

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](#). Donations can be made online or through mail and telephone. To access these options go to 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. Recent donations, received with thanks, include:

Victoria McCaffrey
Lilina Tham
City of Boroondara - Family Services



Meet & Greet

In early 2010 we are planning a large morning tea for staff who work with and teach children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, especially from child care, kindergartens, schools and specialist services in the Northern and Western regions of metropolitan Melbourne. We will be introducing ourselves and informing guests about our research and its implications for the children with ASD in their care.



Director's Report

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*

*Mr Oreste Pompetti,
Finance & Development,
LTU*

*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*

Welcome to the final issue of Another Piece for 2009. And what a year it has been! We began the second year of our operation this year, and we are growing. Next year, there will be over twenty personnel within the Centre including research staff and students. I am delighted to report that **David Trembath** from Sydney University will be joining OTARC in 2010 as a postdoctoral fellow. We will also welcome **Kavi Jayasinghe**, **Heather Nuske** and **Clare Forsyth** who will begin their post graduate study with us. We will also have three new honours students working on autism projects.

We have had many visitors to the centre over the year, but I must admit to being most delighted to meet with **Prof. de Kretser** recently. He showed keen interest in the work we are doing at the centre, and was most encouraging of our efforts. I also recently met with a team from Sri Lanka who were on a WHO sponsored initiative to learn more about autism specific programs in Australia in an effort to improve services for affected children in Sri Lanka. **Dr Hermamali Perera** is one of only two Child Psychiatrists in Sri Lanka, which has a population of over 25 million! She and her colleagues were particularly interested in our early identification work.



*Associate
Professor
Cheryl
Dissanayake,
PhD MAPS*

Next year will see the opening of the new Margot Prior Wing at La Trobe University. The building, which has recently begun, was delayed as an **outcome of the federal government's School Regeneration Projects**. As a result, much of the building will now take place over the hot summer months, which we hope won't lead to further delays. The Director of the **La Trobe Community Children's Centre**, Jenny Reynolds, and I dreamt about the possibility of a centre dedicated to children with an ASD long ago, well before the Helping Children with Autism Initiative. So the current reality of this project helps us weather the inevitable delays - because next year, our dream will come to fruition!!



I would like to take the opportunity to wish our readers the compliments of the season and thank our donors, the team, our supporters, volunteers, research participants, and friends for an exciting and rewarding year. I am sure that 2010 will give us the chance to extend our research activities in discovering more about Autism Spectrum Disorders and ways to further help those with an ASD.



Media File

Early intervention in autism

New diagnostic techniques and early intervention programs are improving the prospects for children with autism. (By Jane McCredie, ABC Health & Wellbeing, October 15, 2009)

<http://www.abc.net.au/health/thepulse/stories/2009/10/15/2714894.htm>

OTARC's regular column in the Help4Parents e-newsletter continued.

Dr Dissanayake was featured in an informal profile in the La Trobe UniNews of 16 November 2009.

OTARC was also featured in **La Trobe's publication "Ambitions into Achievements" (December 2009).**



Grants & tenders

Research Funding

We have been successful in the following grant applications:

- ARC Project Grant (Bavin, Dissanayake, Kidd & Prior): Language processing in children with high-functioning autism: Evidence from eye tracking.
- LTU IGS Grant: Upgrade of behaviour coding software and associated hardware.
- APEX Grant: Amanda Richdale and Angelica Rose (Voice and Movement) for the project: *An evaluation of the "Drama for Every Day Life" program for children and adolescents with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder.*



Research News

Australasian Autism Research Collaboration

The third meeting of the AARC was held in Adelaide on November 25th. A focus of this meeting was discussion of the **establishment of an 'Australasian Society for Autism Research'**. We also plan to publish a journal of the Society, with ACER keen to be associated in this endeavour. A subgroup of the AARC received applications for the APEX Foundation Grant for Autism with 18 applications received. The APEX grant was awarded to Amanda Richdale and Angelica Rose (Voice and Movement) for the project: *An evaluation of the "Drama for Every Day Life" program for children and adolescents with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder.*

The next meeting of the AARC is in Brisbane in March 2010. Autism researchers are encouraged to visit the AARC website at www.maccs.mq.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/autism

Recent Publications

Richdale, A., & Schreck, K. (2009). Sleep problems in autism spectrum disorders: Prevalence, nature & possible biopsychosocial aetiologies. *Sleep Medicine Reviews, 13*, 403-411.

Chu, J. & Richdale, A. L. (2009). Sleep quality and psychological well-being in mothers of children with a developmental disability. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 30*, 1512-1522.

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.



Dr Dissanayake presented a seminar at the **Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health Annual Professional Development Program** (Oct. 2). She also gave a Keynote at the **Boroondara Early Years Conference** (Oct. 14) and at the inaugural **APS Educational Theory and Practice Conference** (Nov.27).

Dr Dissanayake also participated in the **AWARES Conference 2009**. This was the fifth year of this online world autism conference run by the Editor of Awares, Adam Feinstein, and hosted by Autism Cymru, Wales' National Charity for Autism. This online meeting includes international autism researchers and clinicians, and provides delegates with a unique opportunity to put questions directly online in the discussion forum. The conference ran from November 30 until December 11.



Dr Richdale attended the **Australasian Sleep Association** meeting in Melbourne in early October and presented a poster with Dr Kimberly Schreck from Penn State **University, USA: "Parent Knowledge about Childhood Sleep"**. Some parents of children with an ASD participated in this study.

Dr Richdale also gave a guest lecture in early October on ASD at Melbourne University to students doing a **Master of Teaching – Early Childhood**.

In August and September Dr Richdale gave lectures on ASD to RMIT University Honours and Master of Psychology students and a lecture on sleep in children to Master of Psychology students.

At the end of October Dr Richdale discussed plans with Kerrie Nelson and Claire Allen from **Giant Steps NSW** to visit NSW to provide a workshop on sleep in ASD early in 2010.

On November 6, Dr Richdale recorded **"Sleep in ASDs"** for Occupational Therapists Australia as **part of their "OT expert" series for the OT-Australia Web-based Autism Learning Package**.

The 8th Annual Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Forum

hosted by Autism Victoria

Tuesday 10th November 2009,

Grevillea Room—Darebin Arts & Entertainment Centre, Preston

Over 90 participants attended the annual ASD Research Forum to hear about the latest autism research projects in Victoria. The day was a resounding success, and the videotaped program included four oral presentations and two posters presented by staff and students from the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre.

Papers

Josephine Barbaro & Cheryl Dissanayake (*La Trobe University*)

Prospectively identifying infants 'at risk' of an ASD in a community-based sample: Results from the Social Attention and Communication Study

Catherine Bent & Cheryl Dissanayake (*La Trobe University*)

The role of social attention in early development: Eye gaze behaviours in autism

Felicity Chandler & Cheryl Dissanayake (*La Trobe University*)

An exploration of the internal working models of caregiver attachments in high-functioning children with Autistic Disorder

Amanda Newbiggin & Cheryl Dissanayake (*La Trobe University*)

Social understanding and social responsiveness from the self's and other's perspectives in children with High-Functioning Autism

Posters

Cheryl Dissanayake, Joh Schembrey & Thomas Suddendorf

Delayed self recognition in children with autistic disorder: Evidence for a temporally extended self

Amanda Richdale & Tony Robinson

Parent and child factors associated with sleep problems in pervasive developmental disorders, Down syndrome and intellectual disability



International Research News

While none of the children in the study were "cured" of autism, those receiving two years of intensive therapy achieved major leaps in IQ score, big improvements in their use of language and significant gains in their ability to handle the kinds of everyday tasks necessary for a child to function at school and at play.

New evidence that ESDM helps children with Autism

At the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, we were delighted to see the recent publication (in Paediatrics), led by Professors Dawson and Rogers, which supports the use of ESDM with children aged less than two years with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Many readers will remember that the OTARC invited Professor Sally Rogers (who developed the ESDM) and her team in February 2009 to introduce this new model to Australia. We have chosen the ESDM for implementation at the new Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre: The Margot Prior Wing, to open in August 2010.

Autism is rarely diagnosed before the ages 3 or 4 despite many parents suspecting that something was wrong with their child within the first year. The Social Attention and Communication Study (SACS), conducted by Josephine Barbaro and colleagues at OTARC, has shown that by training nurses to undertake developmental surveillance from the first year of life, children can be identified as toddlers. Despite the emphasis on early detection, there has been very little if any research on how to intervene effectively for children so young. Ideally, early intervention needs to start prior to diagnosis, when the earliest warning

Researchers have shown for the first time that if a child is diagnosed with autism as early as 18 months of age, offering age-appropriate intervention can lead to raised IQ levels and improved language skills and behaviour. The goal of using the Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) in a well designed randomized control trail was to determine how much the debilitating effects of autism can be prevented or reduced.

signs are detected.

The ESDM resembles other types of autism behaviour treatment but focuses more on social interaction and communication, which are both areas of difficulty for children with autism. It uses key elements of Applied Behaviour Analysis, a rigorous system for shaping behaviour by dividing desired behaviours into small, measurable — and teachable — units and using rewards to reinforce them. It also incorporates a more naturalistic,

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"... parents can pick up the ESDM therapy methods within six hours of working with therapists."

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relationship-based approach that draws heavily on decades of research on normal child development. "We follow the sequence of normal development in everything we teach," explains Professor Rogers of the MIND Institute at the University of California, Davis.

ESDM therapists begin with the nonverbal communication of smiles, gestures and eye contact that normally precedes speech but which toddlers with autism have missed. The therapy itself "looks like play," says Rogers. "If you saw it, you would say, that's what I do **with my own baby.**" And parents can pick up the ESDM therapy methods within six hours of working with therapists.

The new study involved 48 children aged 18 to 30 months. Half were randomly assigned to receive the ESDM for 15 hours a week of one-on-one work with trained therapists and another 16 hours a week with parents, who were taught how to continue the treatment during everyday activities. The other 24 children were assigned to a control group and referred to a variety of community based therapists. The control group received less intensive therapy than the intervention group, but still got an average of nine hours a week of one-on-one therapy and another nine hours a week in a specialized



Professor Sally Rogers gave us an exciting introduction to Early Start Denver Model intervention when she spoke to Australian audiences in February 2009.

preschool or other group setting. After two years, children in the ESDM group were way ahead of the control group. Their IQ scores had jumped an average of 17.6 points, to a mean of 78.6, which is just within range of normal intelligence. Much of the gain came in their ability to understand and use language. The control group, by contrast,

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ESDM resembles other types of autism behaviour treatment but focuses more on social interaction and communication, which are both areas of difficulty for children with autism.

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gained seven points, and remained within the intellectual disability range. Children who received the ESDM also improved in their adaptive behaviour, comprising everyday skills such as getting dressed, brushing their teeth and participating in family meals. Children in the control group improved more slowly, falling further behind normal peers. Most notable, almost 30 per cent in the ESDM group were re-diagnosed with a less severe form of autism called Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) compared to just 5 per cent (one child) in the control group.

The children who took part in the ESDM study will be followed by the researchers for several years. This study marks the first important step in treating very young children with an ASD, which, over the next few years, should bring greater clarity to autism treatment.

"It's crucial, if we're going to offer screening at such a young age, that we can offer an intervention, and now we know we have methods that are effective."

Read more:

<http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1943512,00.html#ixzz0YNdQITOm>

http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20091130/autism_0911/20091130?hub=Health

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/conditions/11/30/autism.study>

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/conditions/11/30/autism.study>

For more information on how to recognize autism, EDMS and other possible therapies, go to <http://www.autismspeaks.org/> and <http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute/>.



Visitors to our Centre



Wendy
Lovell MP

You can follow us on TWITTER & FACEBOOK For up-to-the-minute postings of the latest news from our centre you can follow our centre on TWITTER at *OlgaTennison (NB. no space) or become a Friend of OTARC on FACEBOOK (Facebook search: Olga Tennison).

Recent visitors to OTARC have included Shadow Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development, Wendy Lovell MP (Member for Northern Victoria Region); Wojciech Nadachowski, Co-ordinator Community Relations & Fundraising, Alpha Autism; Kerrie Nelson and Claire Allen from Giant Steps in NSW; and Yana Gotmaker and her team from ACER. Other visitors included Dr Mark Neilsen (see next page), four psychiatrist/paediatricians from Sri Lanka visiting Melbourne on a WHO trip to see Australian services for

autism - accompanied by Dr Sian Hughes - Prof Hemamali Perera (Child Psychiatrist, Faculty of Medicine Colombo), Dr Deepthi Perera (Director Maternal and Child Health, FHB- Ministry of Health), Dr Neil Thalagala (Program Officer CH FHB, Ministry of Health), and Dr Anoma Jayathilaka. Anne McDade, a speech pathologist with the National Health Service in Lanarkshire, Scotland and a PhD Candidate at Glasgow University also visited us for a day to find out more about the SACS study.

We publish this item as a service to our readers. To find out more please go directly to the organisation involved.

Outside the Square Psychology

This is a new fee-for-service psychology practice in Melbourne's Eastern Suburbs (set up by Kirsty Kerr, formerly of Autism Vic and ABIA.) providing services to children with Autism, Asperger Syndrome, PDD-NOS, Developmental Delay, and Intellectual Disability. Services include [counselling](#), [assessment](#), [intervention](#), [professional training](#), and [workshops](#).

They will be offering regular parent programs, workshops & information seminars.

More Information can be found at <http://www.outsidethesquarepsychology.com.au/>



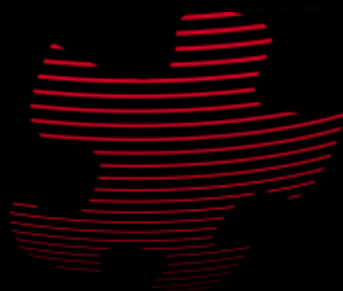
Participants are needed for our research projects. If you, or a family member, wishes to participate in research please email the Centre at otarc@latrobe.edu.au or phone 9479 2497. Many research projects need typically developing children as well as children with an Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Out of Africa

Dr Mark Nielsen, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Queensland, visited our Centre in November. Dr Nielsen completed his Honours and PhD (supervised by Dr Dissanayake) at La Trobe University. During his visit Dr Nielsen gave an **interesting lecture entitled “Where does culture come from? Clues from Apes, Bushmen and Children”**. Children grow up in environments saturated with tools and objects that they must learn to use. One of the most efficient ways in which children do this is by imitating. Recent work has shown that, in contrast to non-human primates, when young children learn by imitating they focus more on reproducing the specific actions used than the actual outcomes achieved. As a function of this behaviour children will routinely copy arbitrary and unnecessary actions in what has come to be **known as ‘over-imitation’**. Dr Nielsen talked about his research documenting the developmental emergence of over-imitation in the second year of life and recent evidence identifying similarities exhibited by Brisbane children and those living in remote Bushman communities in southern Africa. He argued that, although seemingly maladaptive, over-imitation reflects an evolutionary adaptation fundamental to the development and transmission of human culture.



Dr Nielsen trained OTARC researcher, Lindsay Pamment, to test children with ASD to discover if they over-imitate in the same way as typically developing children. This work is being undertaken with Dr Dissanayake and Dr Virginia Slaughter.



Olga Tennison
AUTISM RESEARCH CENTRE
A U S T R A L I A



A brighter future
Health and happiness
Good fortune

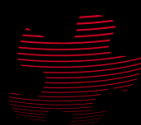
Season's greetings
Infinite Possibilities™



Thank you for your support during 2009. We look forward to exploring more infinite possibilities in 2010.

From Dr Cheryl Dissanayake, Director, and the team at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University

www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc



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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