

Another piece

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

Issue 1, September 2008

Inside this issue:

Who's Who at the Centre	2
Volunteers needed to participate in research	3
Donations	3
Tell 'em all about it!	3
Media file	4
Prof Sue Leekam drops in to OTARC	5
Summary of SACS Study findings	5
RESEARCH NEWS	6
Helen McPherson-Smith Trust funds latest research	
Recent papers	6
Post Graduate News	6

A great day!

After months of planning, the launch of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre was greeted with much excitement.

Proceedings commenced with a welcoming address by the Chancellor of La Trobe University, Mrs Sylvia Walton. The Director of the new Centre, Dr Cheryl Dissanayake then spoke of the mission and objectives for the Centre. She acknowledged the generosity and vision of Mrs Olga Tennison whose initial donation has been the driving force in establishing Australia's first research centre dedicated to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

Mrs Tennison surprised everyone on the day by matching her initial donation with another half million dollars. She spoke of her reasons for wanting the Centre at La Trobe University and her desire to promote research into the causes of Autism and the need for increased awareness to help people with Autism and their families. She expressed the hope that others will see her donation as an example, and also adopt a philanthropic attitude towards the Centre.

Glenda Green, a Maternal and Child Health nurse then spoke of her involvement in the Social Attention and Communication Study (SACS) study. Ms Green spoke of the valuable resource that this study has provided in helping identify children who are displaying characteristics of ASD from approximately 12



L-R: Mrs Olga Tennison, Ms Glenda Green, and Ms Yvonne Hocking.



L-R: The Hon Bill Shorten, Dr Cheryl Dissanayake, Mrs Olga Tennison and Professor Tim Brown.

months. The benefit of earlier identification and diagnosis means earlier access to intervention and other services. (A brief summary of the findings of the SACS study is provided on P4.)

Yvonne Hocking, a parent of a young boy with ASD who was identified within the SACS, spoke of her initial reaction at her son's diagnosis.

She now feels empowered by this knowledge and more able to help her son to learn and reach his potential. Her speech was inspiring for all present.

The Hon Bill Shorten MP, Parliamentary Secretary for

Disability Services then officially launched the Centre and invited Mrs Tennison to help him unveil the banner of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre.

Before guests dispersed to enjoy the refreshments and to take tours of the research labs, Professor Tim Brown, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) came to the podium to announce that the university would again match Mrs Tennison's second generous donation. This news was received with much applause, capping off an excellent launch.



Prof Margot Prior



Dr Cheryl Dissanayake



Mr Clifford Picton



Mr Murray Dawson-Smith



Dr. Catherine Maraffa

Who's who at the Centre?

The Centre is incorporated in the School of Psychological Science within the Faculty of Science, Technology and Engineering (FTSE). Dr Cheryl Dissanayake is its Director, and is accountable to Academic Board via Professor David Finlay, Dean of the FTSE. An Advisory Committee will oversee the operation of the Centre, and guide it toward a sustainable future. The Committee will meet three time per year, and membership is initially for a period of three-years.



Assoc Prof Christine Bigby

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Chair— Prof Margot Prior, Melbourne University and RCH

Dr Cheryl Dissanayake, Centre Director, LTU

Mr Murray Dawson-Smith, CEO Autism Victoria

Dr Catherine Maraffa, Senior Paediatrician, RCH

Mr Clifford Picton, LTU Ombudsman

Associate Professor Christine Bigby, School of Social Work, LTU

Ms Liza Boston, CEO Cracked Pepper Media

Associate Professor Amanda Richdale, RMIT Bundoora



Ms Liza Boston



Assoc Prof Amanda Richdale



Prof David Finlay

The Research Director, Dr Dissanayake, is accountable to the Academic Board via Professor David Finlay, Dean of the Faculty of Science, Technology and Engineering.



Ms Lisbeth Wilks, Admin Officer

Liz is often the first person you will speak to if you contact the Centre.



Volunteers needed to participate in research

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 Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Current research projects are within the three broad areas of Infancy, Biological Markers and Social Cognitive Development (see www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc for details of the research projects).



Tell 'em all about it!

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.

Talks and presentations:

- Talks at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital in July and November
- Presentation at the Queensland Autism Conference in October
- Presentations at the Australian Society for Studies in Intellectual Disabilities Conference in November
- Australian Psychological Society address at Bendigo in November

Dr Dissanayake's program of research, including that undertaken with a number of current doctoral level postgraduate students and other collaborators, both within and outside LTU, is encompassed under the umbrella of the Centre.

Donations

To fund our research activities we rely on the support of private and corporate donors.

Our thanks are extended to the following individuals and organisations who have made recent donations to the **Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre**.

Ray Goddard and family

The Hay family, in memory of Charles Ray Hay

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



Members of the Hay family visited OTARC to present their donation.

Your can make an online tax-deductible donation to the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre. Just go to www.latrobe.edu.au/foundation and don't forget to specify that your donation is for OTARC. Thank you.



Media File

The opening of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre unleashed a flurry of media interest, which continues to raise awareness of our centre's existence and awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorders.

New La Trobe research centre to unravel the mysteries of autism

La Trobe University - MEDIA RELEASE – 26 June

Private Gift Opens Doors

Heidelberg Diamond Valley News – 1 July

Autism centre opens at La Trobe

By Kate Bonsack, Whittlesea Star—1 July

Autism Centre Opens

Diamond Valley Leader – 2 July

Early detection is vital in autism

By Andrew Trounson—The Australian – 2 July

Research centre to unravel the mysteries of autism

By Ernest Raetz, La Trobe Bulletin – July/ August

Calm and collected: Managing anxiety in students with autism—New autism research centre (Break out box)

By Kirsty Kerr, Education Times - July 31

Autism diagnosis crucial

By Melinda Marshall, Preston Leader – 22 July

Autism: From clinic to classroom

Break out box with 'More Information'

By Jim Crawford, Brainstorming: Living, learning & the brain – Winter 08—the Teacher Learning Network

Autism Research with Dr Cheryl Dissanayake

Speaking with Matt Smith

LTU podcast – 25 August 2008

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/opinions-2008/opinion-aug2508c.html>



Dr Dissanayake in the lab. Photo courtesy of the Melbourne Age

Will she find a cure?

By Annie Lawson, The Age/ Metro Life & Times – 3 Sept

Autism—Funding and early intervention are helping parents with autistic children

Jeanette Hill, The Herald Sun – Education Section—9 Sept

Early insights into autism hold promise of better lives

By Sherrill Nixon, The Sydney Morning Herald— 10 Sept

Radio Interviews

*With Steve Chase, - ABC News radio - 11 Sept
With Garth Russell, ABC Newcastle —12 Sept*

*The first Centre in
Australia
specifically devoted
to Research into
Autism Spectrum
Disorders*



Professor Leekam and Dr Dissanayake enjoy collaborating in research into autism.

Prof Leekam's research interests include

- Children's theory of mind and understanding of deception
- Cognitive and behavioural development in children with autism
- The development of joint attention and language.



Prof Sue Leekam drops in to OTARC

During September Professor Sue Leekam dropped in to see Dr Dissanayake at OTARC. Prof Leekam is collaborating with Dr Dissanayake and doctoral student, Jessica Mifsud, investigating the social basis of pretence abilities in children with autism. A Nuffield Foundation grant has funded this research.

Prof Leekam is from the [Department of Psychology](#) at Durham University (UK).

Prof Leekam has written on subjects related to autism and is widely published in books and journals throughout the world. She is interested in the cognitive and social development of children with autism and is investigating the source of this difficulty and its consequences for symbolic development. Her recent findings suggest that children with autism have impaired ability to orient to social stimuli in contrast to non-social stimuli. This problem is related to the later developing ability to use 'joint attention' acts of gaze-following, pointing etc. In new studies her team is investigating the relationship between social orienting and joint attention and the emergence of communicative signals and symbolic skills.



SACS Study results



Prospective Identification of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Infancy and Toddlerhood: The Social Attention and Communication Study (SACS)

Josephine Barbaro & Cheryl Dissanayake

The overall objective of the SACS is to determine whether routine monitoring within the Victorian Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service, of a set of social attention and communication behaviours, can facilitate the prospective identification of infants who will receive a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a community based sample. 22, 168 children have been monitored through the MCH system. As of September 2008, 122 children have been referred and 105 children assessed at OTARC, with 80% of children meeting the criteria for ASD. To date, only one typically developing child has been referred, with the remaining children having either developmental (DD) and/or language (LD) delay.

Preliminary data on the cognitive profiles of these children suggest that children with a milder form of ASD may be misdiagnosed as DD/LD due to the similarity in presentation in cognitive development. However, poor Receptive Language skills (understanding of language) may serve as a red flag for ASDs in children who are showing DD/LD at 24-months of age.

The results from this unique data set are promising, and indicate that it is possible to prospectively identify children with an ASD as early as 12-months via routine monitoring by community service providers in a community based sample of infants. We are optimistic that we will continue to obtain a high ascertainment rate for ASDs, with relatively low false positives (LD/DD children). At the conclusion of the SACS, we hope to ensure that the items we are currently using to monitor signs of ASDs in infancy are implemented in MCH centres across the state, and equivalent services across the nation, to facilitate the identification of ASDs in infancy and toddlerhood.



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

Ph. 03 9479 2497
Fax. 03 9479 1956
Email. otarc@latrobe.edu.au
Web: www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre has been established as a joint initiative of Latrobe University and Autism Victoria and was made possible by a large private donation. The Centre is named 'The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre' in recognition of the donor. The mission of the Centre is to advance research into the nature and causes of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).

The *objectives* of the Autism Research Centre are to

1. Facilitate large and/or ongoing research projects,
2. Facilitate collaboration with other research centres both nationally and internationally,
3. Foster and support a National Research Network,
4. Conduct campaigns to improve the public profile of Autism Research, thereby attracting additional research funds via grants and donations,
5. Provide opportunities for student based research and mentoring programs, and foster knowledge transfer to practitioners within the field.

The Centre will focus on both basic and applied research providing the vehicle for community service provider links and links with other centres and universities involved in autism research in Australia and overseas.



Autism Victoria will play a key role supporting and promoting the work of the Centre, and will provide the valuable link to families, individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and the many service providers.



Helen McPherson-Smith Trust funds the Prospective Identification of Autism in Infancy: A Follow-up Study

This study is planned as a follow-up to the SACS. All children will be re-assessed between 3- and 4 years to determine the validity and stability of the diagnosis, and of the early markers of autistic behaviour identified by the M&CH nurses. A further objective of the follow-up study is to identify early behavioural and cognitive predictors of developmental gains, as well as the impact of early intervention on very early development. This research will also enable us to assess the accessibility, suitability and efficacy of early intervention services, as well as identifying possible gaps in service provision. These data will inform the development of policy regarding early identification and diagnosis, early intervention, referral pathways and service provision for families with very young children with Autism.

Recent papers

Clifford, S.M., & Dissanayake, C. (2008, in press). The early development of joint attention in infants with Autistic Disorder using home video observations and parental interview. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (accepted August 2007).

Dissanayake, C., Bui, Q., Bulhak-Paterson, D., Huggins, R., & Loesch, D. (2008, in press) Behavioural and cognitive phenotypes in idiopathic autism versus autism associated with fragile X syndrome. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (accepted April 2008).

Post Graduate News

Welcome to Cherie Green, from the MIND Institute in California, USA, who will be completing her PhD at our centre.

Sarah Chan is to be congratulated as the first recipient of the PhD Scholarship at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre for her work on the organisation of memory in children with autism.