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Prof Sally Rogers comes to promote infant intervention in Australia, February 2009

Two major activities are organized for 2009. We have invited Prof Sally Rogers and two of her colleagues from the MIND Institute at UC Davis in Sacramento to train Australian professionals on the Early Start Denver Model, which is an early intervention designed for very young children with autism. The workshops will be held in the last week of February. The first event will be a large introductory forum (for family members and carers, students and professionals) introducing the Early Start Denver Model. This will be followed by a two-day intensive team training workshop where three established EI teams (one each from WA, NSW and Vic) will **be trained on Sally's** model. More details will be distributed soon.



Professor Rogers developed the Early Start Denver Model for very young children with ASD.



What do we know? Where should we go?

Our April activity is a small and focused workshop for leading Australasian autism researchers titled 'Autism Research in Australasia: What do we know? Where should we go?' The aim of this workshop, that will be hosted by the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, is to facilitate research collaboration, to identify overlaps and gaps in autism research, and to plan a national research agenda. Invitations have already gone out for this meeting, which will be held at La Trobe University on April 6-7, 2009.



Director's Report

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

Dr Cheryl Dissanayake, Centre Director, LTU

Mr Murray Dawson-Smith, CEO Autism Victoria

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

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, ASD Research Reference Group

Cherie Green, PhD candidate, LTU Student representative

I am delighted to announce the success of a Helping Children with Autism Package tender application to FachSIA with the Parenting Research Centre (the lead agency) to develop and run workshops nationally for parents of newly diagnosed children with an ASD aged 0-6 years. The work undertaken as part of this project coheres well with our research on early identification, which has recently received considerable attention in the media.

It has been a busy couple of months since our last newsletter, with research meetings and related visits from national and international colleagues, as well as planning for more visits next year. I am especially looking forward to welcoming Prof. Sally Rogers and two of her skilled team members from the M.I.N.D Institute to OTARC in February.

It was especially lovely to have Elfriede back on desk for a few weeks from **Italy....it was as if she had never left!!** And now we have Assoc. Prof Amanda (Mandy) Richdale working at the Centre on Fridays (and possibly increasing her role with us in 2009!). She currently has an honorary research position at LTU, and has been assisting with our planning for the Autism Research in Australasia workshop in April.

Given the demands of the Centre, I plan to reduce my time within the School of Psychological Science, and increase my role in the Directorship of OTARC in 2009. As we are fast heading to the end of this year and into the next, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all our readers greetings for the festive season that lies ahead. May it be peaceful and restful!

Cheryl Dissanayake, PhD MAPS

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](#).

Eva & Stan Marks
Adele Woods

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

Congratulations to our Director

We are happy to announce that Dr Cheryl Dissanayake has received a promotion to Associate Professor and Reader in Psychology.

November saw our corridors bustling again as Elfriede visited us for three weeks. She was hardly given the chance to sightsee or dine out. We had her working from the moment she stepped off the plane. Since returning to Prato she has sent us word of her activities. Elfriede will visit again in 2009.

Greetings from Elfriede Ihsen in Prato, Italy

What an eventful and exciting year it has been! I retired from my position at Swinburne University at about the same time as Cheryl was informed about the generous donation which allowed her to set up OTARC at La Trobe University. I immediately offered her my assistance on a voluntary basis and was appointed Honorary Research Fellow by the School of Psychological Science. Also at about the same time my partner, Prof Brian Fildes from the Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC), was asked by **Monash to establish a European “outpost” of MUARC** at their campus in Prato. This created a huge conflict of interests for me. We decided that both are possible. The only impediment is the 10-hour time difference between Italy and Melbourne, during the Southern summer, 8 hours during winter. But we manage. Cheryl tucks her children into bed, I finish my breakfast and **it’s time to “skype”**. **This happens about once every fortnight**, depending what needs to be done. We exchange emails almost on a daily basis. I also have frequent email contact with other members of OTARC and the University.

Before I left for Italy in July I assisted Cheryl with the setting up of OTARC by developing the website (www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc); applying successfully for a research grant from the Helen Macpherson Smith Foundation and sourcing other funding opportunities; liaising with administrative and technical staff at all levels of the University about the administration of our funds, setting up of OTARC and preparation for the launch; developing initial plans for setting up an autism **-specific children’s centre at La Trobe, and last but not least**, with coordinating activities leading up to the launch of OTARC in June. Those months were busy, but also immensely rewarding. I felt welcomed and appreciated by not only Cheryl, but all of the staff I came in contact with. It was difficult to leave.

In our first few months in Prato my most urgent priority was the establishment of our household. I also found myself getting involved in the preparations for the launch of MUARC – Europe. Assisting with the launch of two research centres in one year must be a record! Some people have suggested that I should start **marketing myself as the “Launcher of Research Centres”**. **So, if there is anyone out there about to launch a research centre, make me an offer.**



For the MUARC Europe launch we invited the Australian Ambassador to Italy, none other than The Hon Amanda Vanstone. She told me that The Hon Tim Fisher has been appointed Ambassador to the Holy See at the Vatican in Rome and is coming to Italy with his family in 2009. As most of you know, Tim and his wife Judy have a son with autism and have been very involved with Autism services in NSW. Judy has met Cheryl and so I am looking forward to establishing contact with the Fishers when they get here.

During my time in Prato, I have assisted Cheryl with planning for the autism forum in April 2009, developing and writing the application for FaHCSIA funding for the Autism-Specific Early Learning and Care Centre at La Trobe and with the writing of another research grant **submission. Cheryl also uses me as one of her “sounding boards” for decisions and as a critical reader of publications that have relevance to OTARC activities.** And now that I am established in Prato I will have time again to work on OTARC projects and our dreams for the long-term future of OTARC.

Assisting with the establishment and early operation of OTARC continues to be a challenging task, but one that I am enjoying very much. I feel very privileged to be involved in such a worthwhile project.

Now I must go and have my mid-morning espresso in a café just around the corner. What a life!

My best wishes to everybody in Oz for Christmas and 2009,

Elfriede Ihsen PhD



Media File

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre has had substantial media coverage since the launch (see website) both in print, radio, and more recently on TV. While the initial articles were on the launch, the focus more latterly has been on our early identification study. Cheryl also had a couple of radio interviews about a new UK DVD released in Australia, which is designed to teach children with autism about emotions (The Transporters).

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

Letters to the Editor – Education Times – 11 Sept

Timing vital for detecting autism by Kamahl Cogdon - The Daily Telegraph, Sydney 15 Sept

Autistic children can now read emotions with animated DVD by IANS – Sydney Morning Herald (syndicated) 22 Sept

Autism Breakthrough by Kamahl Cogdon – Herald Sun 26 Sept 2008 (This article was also syndicated to 62 different publications throughout Queensland.)

A First for Autism by Cassie Maher Progress Leader 30 Sept

Promising program – (News section) Progress Leader, Oct 21

Channel 9 – A Current Affair – Early Diagnosis – 6 Nov

Two visitors from USA drop in to chat with the OTARC team

In town for the Australian Society for the Study of Intellectual Disability (ASSID) and the Disability Support Workers Conference in Melbourne in November 2008, Prof James Mulick from the Dept of Paediatrics at the Ohio State University and Dr Laraine Masters Gliden from St Mary's College of Maryland (Dept of Psychology) and Georgetown University (Centre on Health and Education) found time to visit our centre and speak with our team.

Prof Mulick specialises in Learning and behaviour development and has published over 100 articles, chapters and books in the areas of learning, developmental psychobiology, behaviour analysis, mental retardation and developmental disabilities, policy analysis and post-doctoral professional education.



Dr Gliden has worked in the disability field for more than 40 years. She is most known for her ground breaking research on positive outcomes for parents rearing children with developmental disabilities. This research has helped change the thinking of parents and professionals about what it means to have a child with special needs as part of the family.





Tell them 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.

Conference presentations include:

Barbaro J., & Dissanayake, C. Propective identification of Autism in infancy and toddlerhood: The Social Attention and Communication Study. Paper presented at the Australasian Society for Studies in Intellectual Disability, Melbourne, Nov. 2008. This paper was also presented at the Autism Queensland Research Forum, Brisbane, Oct. 2008.

Dissanayake, C., Mifsud, J., & Leekam, S. Interpersonal engagement during pretend play in young children with high-functioning autism. Paper presented at the Australasian Society for Studies in Intellectual Disability, Melbourne, Nov. 2008.

Barbaro, J., & Dissanayake, C. Developmental profiles of infants and toddlers on the autism spectrum from a community based sample. Paper presented at the Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Forum, Melbourne, Nov. 2008.

Mifsud, J., & Dissanayake, C. Symbolic play in high functioning autism: An exploration of children's production and comprehension. Poster presented at the Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Forum, Melbourne, Nov. 2008.

Dissanayake, C., & Kelly, R. Deficits in object substitution in autism: In search of an explanation. Poster presented at the Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Forum, Melbourne, Nov. 2008.

A visit from Robyn Young



Josie Barbero (PhD candidate) and Assoc Prof Robyn Young had the opportunity to discuss Josie's research.

In November Assoc Prof Robyn Young, from Flinders University, South Australia, visited Melbourne to give the keynote paper at the Autism Spectrum Disorder Research Forum. While here, Dr Young visited the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre to share information and ideas with the OTARC team.

Dr Young is particularly interested in identifying infants who have autism and has developed the Autism detection in Early Childhood (ADEC) tool to facilitate early diagnosis. In February 2003 she established an Early Intervention Research Program at Flinders University, aiming to provide information and services that make possible the commencement of home-based therapy for children with autism. This Early Intervention Research Program (EIRP) is called StartRight. Together with colleagues from the Sansom Institute UniSA she is also investigating the metabonomic profiles of children with autism, and hopes to link these results with clinical data to develop a diagnostic and phenotyping tool.

Grants & tenders

OTARC was involved in the submission of two tenders (for the Helping Children with Autism initiative) to FAHCSIA. The first was undertaken with the Parenting Research Centre (which is the lead agency) to develop and run workshops nationally for parents of newly diagnosed children with an ASD aged 0-6 years. Other partners in this project include RMIT, Monash, and Autism Victoria. And we were successful! The tender is worth \$12 million (3 million/year over 4 years). We are already busy with planning, as the first workshops will begin in February.

LTU is the lead agency on the second tender submitted with the RCH to secure an Autism Early Learning and Child Care Centre on campus. It is for a 20-place facility and is planned as an extension of the existing LTU Community Children's Centre.

Current Post Graduate Students at OTARC

Josephine Barbaro, PhD candidate: Prospective identification of autism in infancy.

Sarah Chan, PhD candidate: Narrative abilities and autobiographical memory in children on the Autism Spectrum.

Cherie Green, PhD candidate: A mixed longitudinal study of growth in boys with autistic disorder.

Rucha Joshi, PhD candidate: A longitudinal study of autism in girls.

Amanda Newbign, DPsych candidate: Social understanding and social responsiveness in school-aged children with high-functioning autism from the self and other's perspective.

Felicity Chandler, DPsych candidate: The development of caregiver attachment and self understanding in school-aged children with high-functioning autism.

Jessica Mifsud, DPsych candidate: Further explorations of pretence abilities and deficits in young children with high-functioning autism.

IMFAR 2009

The International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR) is being held in Chicago from 7-9 May, 2009. The Director and four of the Centre's Post Doctoral students will be attending this meeting (pending acceptance of submissions).

Post Graduate News

The Centre's second PhD Scholarship has now been awarded to Ms Rucha Joshi, who has a Masters Degree in Cognitive Science from Oxford Brookes University. Her research will focus on autism in females, an area which to date has had relatively little attention given the small proportion of females (to males) affected with an ASD (1:4).

2009 will see the number of doctoral students within the Centre swell to eight (4 PhD and 4 DPsych).

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.



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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