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PUTTING A PREMIUM ON GOOD HEALTH

Article by Marie McInerney as published in the Winter 2008 issue of HCF member magazine Fit & Well.

It may be hard to put a price on good health but the value of good health and medical research is clear.

Whether through the discovery of penicillin and vaccines or cures for previously common illnesses, we have all benefited from medical research – to the point of adding an extra eight years to our life expectancy in the past 40 years.

“That’s due, by and large, to health and medical research,” says Rebecca James, Chief Executive Office of Research Australia, a national not-for-profit alliance of organisations – including the HCF Health & Medical Research Foundation – committed to promoting increased health research in Australia.

James cites research by Access Economics showing a \$5 social and economic return for every dollar invested in medical research, as individuals and communities enjoy longer, better, healthier and more productive lives because of health innovation.

HCF (www.hcf.com.au) has played a part in realising the benefits of health and medical research since it established the HCF Health and Medical Research Foundation in 2000 to “assist and improve the prevention, treatment and cure of diseases in the general community”.

It has now invested nearly \$6 million into 17 separate projects across Australia, supporting a range of critical research areas (see case studies next to this article). Its focus is increasingly on translating the benefits of modern science into new or improved standards of patient care.

According to James: “We’re seeing a very rapid rate of growth of Australian health and medical research and part of that can be attributed to the leadership of organisations like HCF.”

Case study 1

Making a call on diabetes

Dealing with diabetes is not like just taking a course of antibiotics, says Professor Brian Oldenburg from Monash University's School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine. "It can be very complicated, with glucose tests, the need for diet change, exercise and other management demands," he says.

As a result, many people don't manage the condition well. "Most people who have Type 2 diabetes or are at high risk don't even know and, when they are diagnosed, more than 50 per cent don't adhere to their treatment regime," he says.

Assisted by a \$310,000 HCF Health and Medical Research Foundation grant, Professor Oldenburg's team is developing an innovative computer-controlled, interactive telephone system for improving management of Type 2 diabetes. Made up of thousands of pieces of recorded conversational prompts and responses, the system will respond personally to the caller's own issues, concerns and medical histories.

The aim is to provide a 'virtual' clinic, available around the clock and in rural and regional as well as metropolitan areas. "It's not replacing GP or other specialist supports but it will complement existing services," he says. "Diabetes is a 24x7 condition, so flexibility and availability of advice and support is vital."

HCF offers a special healthy lifestyle program for members with Type 2 diabetes. For more details, visit our website at www.hcf.com.au and follow the 'Type 2 diabetes program' link from the 'health information' menu.

Case study 2

Combined care to prevent strokes

Pilot data from an innovative Australian model of integrated care has shown promise for the effective management of vascular risk factors in stroke survivors, in an attempt to prevent recurrent strokes that lead to increasing disability and death.

The definitive project, ICARUSS, is supported by a \$1.4 million grant from the HCF Health and Medical Research Foundation and is currently being trialled across Australia, with interest from international collaborators.

ICARUSS promotes the seamless integration of care – involving hospital specialists, GPs, personal carers and patients themselves – aimed at reducing the incidence and impact of recurrent strokes.

A patient's risk factors are assessed in hospital, and 'shared care' is managed by a coordinator to provide regular, clear and comprehensive updates and, where necessary, alerts about health and behavioural issues.

And it may have a wider impact, according to principal investigator, Dr Jacques Joubert, from the National Ageing Research Institute. "This model of care appears to be robust and effective, and may also have important implications for the prevention of vascular dementia," he says.

Case study 3

Health care at your fingertips

We're all tempted to do it the minute we get a new pain or symptom – hit the internet to find out what it might be and what's the best treatment.

The trouble is, says Enrico Coiera, Director at the Centre for Health Informatics at the University of New South Wales, many health internet sites can be misleading.

"Going to 'Google' and shopping for a book is not the same as getting advice on medication," he says. "Lots of the information we want and need for health care is regional and local. A set of symptoms in Australia might mean something very different in New York and so require very different treatment."

That's not to say, though, that the digital revolution can't deliver health benefits too, and Dr Coiera's team is designing a stand-alone web service for Australian clinicians and consumers.

Assisted by a \$1 million grant from the HCF Health and Medical Research Foundation, the aim is to use the internet, including collaborative features found on social network sites like Facebook, to help people better understand their health issues.

The creation of a 'Healthbook' for Australians to electronically share, and take greater ownership of their health information, was one of the ideas that came out of the recent Australia 2020 Summit as part of a long-term national health strategy.

Professor Coiera was quoted recently in *The Sydney Morning Herald* as saying: "This is exactly the sort of thing we are very keen to try and build.

"We want to use smart search technologies to help everyone get the most relevant health information and make it Australian specific.

"We also want to use the Facebook model to allow people to share it with each other."

Professor Coiera and his team are working on the prototype website that assists people searching for health-related information and sharing it with others. HCF is pivotal in the development of this technology.

“It’s very exciting work and it wouldn’t be possible without the support of HCF,” says Dr Coiera.

Source

*<http://news.smh.com.au/healthbook-could-be-online-soon-expert/20080421-27jy.html>