

# Autism CRC Research Update

Autumn 2016



Transforming the lives of people living with autism across the lifespan.

In this edition...

Finding and **keeping**  
a job

**The Secret Agent Society**  
whole of classroom trial

First graduates from the **Graduate**  
**Certificate in Autism Diagnosis**

Spotlight on **Autism**  
**Research** launched

## Find resources at the Health Hub

The Autism CRC Health Hub aims to provide adults on the autism spectrum, their carers and families and health professionals with up-to-date, evidence-based health and well-being resources. The first in a range of informational resources are now available on the website.

The Autism CRC Health Hub is a major research undertaking within the Adulthood Research Program aiming to enhance life outcomes including the health and well-being of adults on the autism spectrum.

There has never before been such a multi-faceted, collaborative research effort in Australia focused on improving the physical and mental well-being of adults with autism. These evidence-based interventions and resources will give clear guidance to people on the autism spectrum, their families and the health professionals who assist them.

The first in a range of informational resources are now available on the Health Hub.

“Research has been undertaken to understand what health professionals, including general practitioners, actually need to know when supporting autistic clients,” said Anna Urbanowicz from the Queensland Centre for Intellectual and Developmental Disability.

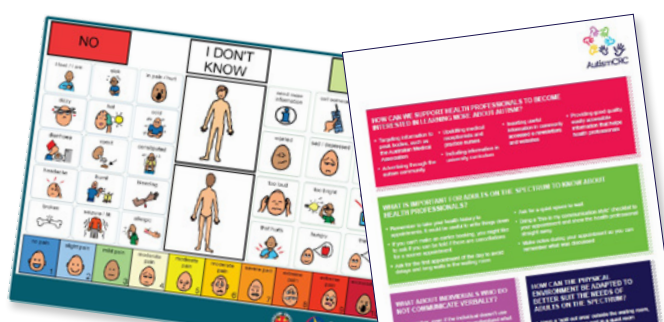
*“We now have the information to develop tools and interventions for general practitioners, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. These interventions will focus on the identification and management of the physical and mental health issues frequently associated with autism.”*

Researchers working on the Health Hub will continue to develop and evaluate interventions, in consultation with adults on the spectrum and

health professionals, in order to provide resources which enhance the health and well-being of adults on the spectrum.

The interventions and outcomes developed for the Health Hub are being informed by the longitudinal study of adults with autism, which is tracking over four years the physical and mental health, well-being, life roles, time use, satisfaction, employment, community access and participation of adults. Visit [autismcrc.com.au/alsaa](http://autismcrc.com.au/alsaa) for details of this study being led by the University of New South Wales.

Visit [autismcrc.com.au/health-hub](http://autismcrc.com.au/health-hub) to learn more about the Health Hub and download current resources.





# From the CEO

Welcome to the Autumn 2016 edition of the Autism CRC Research Update Mr Andrew Davis, Autism CRC CEO

Autism CRC's mid-2016 investment round, launched this quarter, demonstrates both the progress of our CRC program and our continued commitment to working with those on the spectrum and the broader autism community throughout our activities.

The investment call-out saw a particular emphasis on projects that promote the utilisation of our newly emerging research outcomes and others that propose highly innovative solutions that address our program objectives. Applicants are strongly encouraged to engage project teams including adults on the spectrum as peers in research co-production, and also to seek opportunities to leverage other sources of funding in order to deepen the quality and extend the impact of project outcomes.

As we undertake our program and work with the community, gaps continue to be identified in the evidence base for autism-related programs, practice and policy. In seeking to address these and maximise our capacity to invest

in practical outcomes, we are increasingly looking to leverage additional investment from industry and other partners capable of assisting in the development and translation of innovative solutions.

We have recently commissioned two projects with significant leveraged funding.

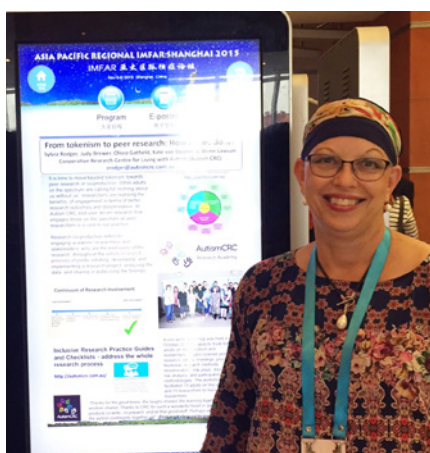
The first relates to our objective of providing earlier and more accurate diagnosis of autism, enabling effective support to be provided at the earliest possible stage. This project will trial a very early intervention program for 12-month-old children with early communication delay, assessing the impact on social-communication skills at 18-months, as well as undertaking a cost-benefit analysis of the program. The project team were able to obtain institutional grants and philanthropic funding, leveraging an additional \$4 to each \$1 of Autism CRC investment. This will allow a comprehensive study at two sites, through the University of Western Australia and La Trobe University, and sees two additional PhD Scholars join Program 1.

The second project supports our Adulthood Research Program through the development of a virtual

marketplace for job candidates on the autism spectrum, employers and service providers. The project will support autistic adults in securing and succeeding in employment through connecting job seekers and employers in an on-line community, sharing employment opportunities, stories and support, as well as providing access to employment tools and services.

The project partners include Autism CRC Participants, La Trobe University and Curtin University, along with Specialisterne Centre Australia and Hewlett Packard. A reference group representing autistic adults, service providers and employer groups will help guide the program. In addition to funding from partners in the project, the Project Team was successful in securing a grant of \$215,000 in cash, as well as in-kind development support, from Salesforce through its Force for Change program.

Extending the scale and reach of the Autism CRC network through such relationships further enhances our unique capacity to bring together the right people, across Australia and internationally, to deliver high quality outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum across the lifespan.



Professor Sylvia Rodger, Autism CRC Director of Research and Education, recently presented at the International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR) in Shanghai on our work in peer research.

Representing the Autism CRC Inclusive Research Project Team, Professor Rodger called for a move beyond tokenism to peer research or research co-production. Other Autism CRC researchers, Prof Cheryl Dissanayake, Assoc Prof Amanda Richdale, Dr Mirko Uljarevic, Ms Ru Ying Cai, Dr Deb Keen and Assoc Prof Sonja Girdler, also presented posters or oral sessions. Autism CRC PhD Scholar, Ms Cai, received an INSAR scholarship to enable her attendance at the meeting.



# Research into finding a job and keeping a job

Melissa Scott has just begun the third and final year of her PhD through Autism CRC in the Adulthood Research Program at Curtin University. She has developed a tool to assist employers in supporting adults on the autism spectrum to find a job and keep a job.



Occupational Therapist, Melissa Scott, is currently completing her PhD through Autism CRC developing the Integrated Employment Success Tool (IEST). The tool aims to provide employers with the skills and knowledge needed to support individuals on the autism spectrum in the workplace.

Individuals on the spectrum have a very high rate of unemployment or underemployment. One of the key goals of the CRC is to increase participation in the workforce to provide meaningful and sustainable employment.

"Employment is such a large part of our lives for financial security, independence and for building social networks," said Melissa.

"People on the spectrum often have the skills to do the job very well, but social and communication difficulties can sometimes create barriers to long term employment.

"My research aims to bridge the knowledge gap in the workplace, change attitudes and build employer confidence that simple strategies and support can make a significant difference in the long term success of an autistic employee."

As her research has progressed, Melissa has found that the attitudes of all managers, co-workers and other staff play a significant role in employment success. Education about autism and the strengths of those on the spectrum is a crucial part of this tool.

Melissa is currently recruiting employers across Australia to test the tool and determine its effectiveness.

***"The tool is designed as a decision tree covering every aspect of the employment process. The modifications described in the resource are not just physical, but also cover social, sensory, and communication adjustments."***

An example of the types of modifications described in the tool cover the interview process which is

particularly daunting and one of the most difficult barriers to employment for adults on the spectrum.

"We suggest a number of different ways to choose a candidate rather than the traditional interview process, for example, providing a work trial rather than an interview. If implemented, employers will quite possibly get the best candidate for the position."

Melissa is looking forward to this next exciting phase of her PhD as her research is applied in real workplaces.

"Doing my PhD through Autism CRC has been extremely positive as all research projects are function- and outcomes-based, and every research project forms part of a much bigger picture and goal across the lifespan."

"The CRC has provided a community of support from other scholars and access to some of the best autism researchers in Australia."

If you would like to be part of this important study and trial the tool, please visit [autismcrc.com.au/autism-workplace](https://autismcrc.com.au/autism-workplace)

# Our graduates have the skills to diagnose autism

Kate Pollard is a Speech Pathologist who is working in some of the most remote communities in the Northern Territory with the Office of Disability in the Department of Health. She has recently completed the Autism CRC Graduate Certificate in Autism Diagnosis through the University of Western Australia.

Kate Pollard has spent her career working in early intervention, specialising in autism. She currently works with more than 25 clinicians from various fields, travelling to remote communities to provide disability support.

Diagnosis of autism is a complex and often lengthy process. There is currently no national standard for autism diagnosis and limited opportunities for clinicians to become trained in diagnostic practices.

The Graduate Certificate in Autism Diagnosis provides the specialist knowledge and clinical skills required to diagnose autism effectively. This can change the lives of many children and families - ensuring that children with autism are able to get the right intervention as early as possible.

"In the Northern Territory, we must work with paediatricians to finalise a diagnosis of autism for the children in the communities where my team visits," said Kate.

*"The course has helped tremendously, particularly with differential diagnosis. I now have the evidence base and knowledge behind me to support my own observations which assists the paediatricians in providing a formal diagnosis."*

"I have already assisted in diagnosing children since completing the course which makes an enormous difference for the child, their families and their schools. I can give families and teachers individualised strategies and resources to support the child and help them to achieve their potential."

The course has been developed by Autism CRC researchers at The University of Western Australia (UWA) and La Trobe University to give clinicians a strong knowledge base, including an overview of the history of autism diagnosis, through to current best practice and future developments.

Kate's enthusiasm to put into practice the knowledge gained through the course has influenced the whole team in which she works.

"My team has more awareness of the indicators of autism through my enhanced knowledge and I have prepared an in-service to be delivered in the next few months. The team are now able to refer to me for support with the diagnostic process and specific strategies for clients with varying needs attributed to the whole spectrum of autism.

"I am extremely appreciative for the Battery World Scholarship. Financial assistance with completing this course means I can help children and their families in the communities I work and also support my colleagues in recognising the early signs of autism."

The Graduate Certificate was developed as part of the Autism CRC Diagnosis Research Program which aims to provide earlier and more accurate diagnosis of autism in order to obtain the right interventions as early as possible.

The Graduate Certificate in Autism Diagnosis is being offered in Semester 1, 2016 and will be offered again in Semester 1, 2017. For more information about applying, visit the postgraduate portal of the UWA website.





# Secret Agent Society trials new whole of classroom program

As part of our Education Research Program, Autism CRC researchers are about to begin trialling a whole of classroom version of the highly successful social skills training program, the Secret Agent Society (SAS). The adaptation of the SAS small group program is designed to meet the social-emotional learning objectives of the Australian Curriculum.



Drawing on the strong evidence base of the Secret Agent Society (SAS) small group program, Autism CRC researchers have developed a whole classroom program to benefit even more children.

Multiple research evaluations have demonstrated the effectiveness of SAS in helping children to build emotional and social resilience, deal with bullying and express feelings in appropriate ways.

The research team has worked with staff from all school systems to identify priorities. This feedback has been used to develop a whole of classroom program that is user-friendly for staff to deliver and engaging for all students.

"It is hoped that by expanding the delivery of SAS to a whole of classroom format, all children can learn how to crack the codes of emotion management, problem-

solving and friendships in a fun, engaging way. These skills will help them to achieve their own life goals and to support others to achieve theirs," said Dr Renae Beaumont, who developed the SAS program.

"We have clear evidence that the Secret Agent Society program is effective in small groups and we anticipate this will translate well into a larger whole classroom setting."

Representatives from all school systems have expressed interest in participating in the research project in 2016. Interactive project information sessions were held with staff from each school to encourage their input into the program objectives, content, delivery format and resources.

"The 9-week intervention will be taught to all Grade 5 students in eight schools over the course of 2016 as part of a randomised controlled trial. The program also includes Grade 6 booster lessons to help optimise students' transition to high school in Grade 7."

*"We have worked with school staff to ensure that we have developed a program which can be implemented as part of the current Australian curriculum."*

Commencing in Queensland in 2016, schools from other states across Australia will join the trial in 2017.

"We are very excited to begin trialling the new program. If the trial results are positive, the program will be made available to all Grade 5 students to support them to feel happier, calmer and braver to achieve their best," said Dr Beaumont.

The aim of the Autism CRC Education Research Program is to provide inclusive interventions, such as the whole of classroom program, which will benefit every child in the class.

## Secret Agent Society Training Dates for Semester 1 2016.

Visit [sst-institute.net](http://sst-institute.net) for more information on accessing the small group program.

### Practitioner Training

LOCATION	DATES	CLOSE OF REGISTRATION
Sydney	18-19 May	25 April
Brisbane	1-2 June	9 May
Melbourne	8-10 June	16 May
Perth	22-23 June	30 May



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of SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS®**

### Computer Game Workshop

LOCATION	DATE	CLOSE OF REGISTRATION
Sydney	17 May	25 April
Brisbane	31 May	9 May
Adelaide	8 June	16 May
Perth	21 June	30 May

# Outcome from the Senate Inquiry: Access to real learning

Autism CRC contributed to the Senate Inquiry which focused on education for students with a disability. Many of the recommendations in the Report released by the Committee align with the CRC aim of providing teacher training, inclusive practices and educational design that allow students with a disability to engage more fully with the curriculum and succeed in the school environment.

The Autism CRC Education Research Program is Australia's first, national effort incorporating all school systems and set within the real life context of inclusive school environments.

The Senate Inquiry's Report, *Access to real learning: the impact of policy, funding and culture on students with disability*, has highlighted the need for evidence-based interventions, which are being developed by Autism CRC.

These interventions will ensure that all school staff, and the broader school community, have an understanding of autism and can provide appropriate support.

The Australian-first, Autism CRC Needs Analysis surveyed almost 1,500

educators, parents and students. Each stakeholder group also identified a lack of suitable education and training for staff as a key barrier for providing support for students on the spectrum in schools.

Educators face the challenge of meeting the complex and varied needs of children with autism while maintaining an appropriate learning environment for all students.

"Autism CRC research outcomes will support teachers by developing interventions that are easy to implement for the teacher. Using the principles of Universal Design for Learning, the outcomes will not only make a significant difference for a student on the autism spectrum, but

ultimately benefit the whole class," said Professor Suzanne Carrington, Director of the Education Research Program.

"We are working collaboratively with principals, teachers, allied health professionals and all school systems to ensure the most effective outcomes."

Autism CRC is committed to working with the Government at all levels to ensure the interventions developed benefit children across Australia.

To find out more about the Autism CRC Education Program, visit [autismcrc.com.au/education](http://autismcrc.com.au/education).



During Autism Awareness Month in April, Autism CRC will be holding a series of seminars aiming to provide up-to-date information on autism research across our three research programs including a seminar on autistic voices in research. Stay tuned for more information.

## Find out more

There are many ways for you to get involved with Autism CRC.

Visit the website for news, research outcomes and ways to get involved with Autism CRC.

[autismcrc.com.au](http://autismcrc.com.au)

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