Research into Alzheimer’s disease has received a fillip from two UWA benefactors who say they are at the age when the problem is ripe. Ron and Peggy Bell will donate $100,000 over the next three years to fund a Research Fellow undertaking studies into Alzheimer’s.

The focus will be on the interaction between learning capacity of people with mild Alzheimer’s disease and genetic factors associated with memory and dementia risk.

Ms Mandy Vidovich has been appointed the inaugural Research Fellow.

Casual chat brings funding for “old timer’s disease”

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New path to nursing

Graduates from a diverse range of disciplines who have had a change of heart and would now like to pursue a career in nursing are lining up to register interest in a brand new UWA course that will give them a Masters degree.

The Master of Nursing Science (Entry-to-Practice) enables people to switch career paths without having to do another undergraduate degree. It will lead to

continued on page 9
High school pilot a hit with would-be doctors

The pilot of the Outer Metropolitan Program in three high schools last year proved a resounding success, with one-third of interested students being offered places to study medicine this year.

It has proved so popular that it will be rolled out to 10 outer suburban high schools this year.

And to improve the program, the concept of mentors for the students is being canvassed.

Of the 65 students from Years 10, 11 and 12 who participated in the pilot program last year, 13 sat the UMAT (Undergraduate Medicine and Health Sciences Admission Test), nine were interviewed and four were successful in gaining a place in medicine.

Three students will start this year and one has deferred.

The pilot program involved three schools, one each from the government, independent and Catholic sectors, which identified upper secondary students keen to study medicine or dentistry and considered likely to achieve the requisite TER.

The students attended workshops, visited the University campus and spoke to University role models.

The three high schools involved were Kingsway Christian College, Kolbe Catholic College and Swan View Senior High School. This year the extra seven that will participate are Gilmore College, Girrawheen Senior High School, John Septimus Roe Anglican Community School, John Wollaston Anglican Community School, La Salle College, Lumen Christi College and Mirrabooka Senior High School.

Sue Pougnault, the Faculty's Student Support Co-ordinator, said this year she would like to introduce the concept of mentors who would be doctors and dentists happy to give up an hour of their time to speak to the students.

“They would talk to the students about why they went into medicine or dentistry and the challenges they faced and the problems that are out there now,” she said.

“Many of the students have had not a lot of contact in a non-professional way with doctors and dentists.”

Ms Pougnault has also planned a day's workshop in September when she will bring together all the year 12 students from the 10 high schools to help them with goal-setting and personal development.

“I am really excited about where this program is going,” she said.

Any qualified doctors or dentists prepared to act as mentors can contact Sue Pougnault on 9346 7323.
By Professor Ian Puddey, Dean

The Dean's Desk

A University for All

Due largely to the vision of Sir John Winthrop Hackett, the University of Western Australia (UWA) was established as the State's first University in 1911. It was established as “A university for all”, promoting equal access to tertiary education for all social classes. With a father who started as a telegraph boy in Southern Cross and worked his way upwards as a mail sorter to eventually become a supervisor within the GPO mailroom in Perth, and a mother who was a secretary in the Trades Hall in Midland, I am one of the many thousands who have since been privileged to have benefited from Hackett's original vision. Being able to enter UWA in 1970 on a Commonwealth scholarship (and with no university fees at that time), Medical School was an achievable reality and enabled the realisation of the aspirations instilled by teachers and family during an excellent high school education.

This year we are delighted to continue to fulfill Hackett's original mission by welcoming the first three students into our Medical School who have entered via our Outer Metropolitan Program (see story opposite page). This program was inaugurated by the Faculty last year as a pilot project in three outer urban high schools selected because they had never sent a student to the Medical or Dental School at UWA. This year we have increased to 10 high schools and next year 17 schools will be targeted. This rapid expansion has been made possible through a successful UWA application to the Federal Diversity and Structural Adjustment Fund for a project called AspireUWA. This program was awarded $2.5 million and one of its major goals is to encourage entry into the professions from under-represented groups, building on UWA's successful Rural Medicine and Dentistry program. That program has now been running for eight years and is now successfully recruiting 25 per cent of the intake of the Medical School and up to 10 per cent of the intake of the Dental School from students in rural and remote Western Australia. With 42 students entering via this pathway this year, together with five new indigenous students and our inaugural outer metropolitan students, we can truly now lay claim to recruiting from the whole of the West Australian community for the whole of the WA community.

However, the ongoing realisation of Sir John Winthrop Hackett's vision remains a major challenge to both the University and this Faculty during an era of economic uncertainty for many, financial hardship for some and HECS fees for all. The efforts of Sir John Winthrop Hackett to see his initial vision fulfilled included a bequest he made as founding Chancellor of more than £425,000 (the equivalent of more than $32 million today) to the University. Such large scale generosity is only within the reach of a very few in our society, but smaller donations to secure the establishment of scholarships for those medical and dental students enrolled through special entry pathways are within the reach of many of our alumni. The Kasner Moss bequest has been directed by the Faculty towards the first scholarship for the highest achieving student entering the Medical School through the new Outer Metropolitan Program while the Dental Foundation of Western Australia has already commenced fund raising towards the $120,000 necessary to establish an inaugural scholarship for the first dental student to eventually enter via the same special entry pathway. The ambition is to ultimately see every successful student who enters through our special entry pathways receive a scholarship to encourage their retention and progress through what are long and demanding but ultimately highly rewarding courses. As we move closer towards the celebration of the first 100 years of this University, I now appeal to the alumni of this Faculty to consider how their contributions might further fulfill Sir John Winthrop Hackett's vision of “a university for all”. I look forward to your support.

Jan Puddey
When a group of Health Science students and staff turned up at the local school in a remote village in India, they didn’t muck around. They set to digging the foundations for a rainwater tank and the trench for a ground water pipeline the same day, as part of a broader aim to educate the villagers about the benefits of rainwater harvesting.

The school in Kanagamakanapalli in the state of Karnataka has had no toilets or piped water supply since the school was built 10 years ago.

The practical help, plus a donation by the Health Science team from the School of Population Health (SPH) of $1,658, will enable the school to install a rainwater tank and pipe plus two ecoSan or composting toilets.


Much of the population in the villages in the Bagepalli region, Karnataka, suffers from dental fluorosis – evident in the brown staining on the teeth of children and adults – caused by the high levels of fluoride in the groundwater that is their usual source of water.

The key message for the two-week trip, during which the team visited five villages, was that rainwater is a healthier alternative to the groundwater for drinking.

Dr Jane Heyworth, Sub Dean of Health Sciences, who instigated the inaugural trip and led the team of 24 students and three staff, said the tanks also improved access. The aim was for every house to have its own tank.

“Instead of having to walk to the town pump to get water, the rainwater tank would be at their household,” she said.

Another advantage of harvested rainwater was that it could be used to top up the groundwater table, which was diminishing from over-use, by recharging bore wells. This strategy also reduced the fluoride in the groundwater.

The group embarked on their three-week field trip on November 25. The next day, the terror attacks in Mumbai shook the world. However, the team decided to continue with their plans, albeit curtailing their stay by one week.

In the following fortnight, they helped build filters for the tanks, cleared farm ponds, which were used to harvest rainwater for agricultural purposes, and cleaned and weedied bore wells.

The also experienced “India time”, which meant waiting around a lot between jobs. But they filled it in by playing cricket with the village children and teaching them the Hokey Pokey. This helped build a rapport and meant the villagers were more accepting of their public health messages.

They were working with a non-government organisation, called BIRD-K and were based in the village of Yallampalli, with the nearest major town being Bangalore, 130km away.

Team member Victoria Gray, who was a final year Health Science student and is now a graduate research assistant in the SPH, said the trip summed up the public health theory she had learnt over the previous four years, including disease control, health promotion, epidemiology, health economics, and health research design.

“No end to the adventures” – Health Science team finds plenty in Nehru’s homeland

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“From a public health perspective, it was amazing and a real eye opener to see how these people live, what issues they prioritise, and the scope there is for improvement,” she said.

“In India, they may not have a toilet, they may not have rubbish disposal, but everyone has got a mobile phone.

“For the younger students, when they get to the theory in their course, they will be able to apply it so much better.”

Dr Heyworth agreed that the students saw public health problems at the coalface.

“Although we had a specific target of rainwater harvesting, there were other major issues of litter, waste disposal, infectious diseases,” she said. “We are planning more trips and have been thinking that litter might be the thing we might try and tackle next time.”

-By Cathy Saunders
Mentoring that starts with an ‘S’

By Aimee Nichevich, Research Officer, School of Surgery

WA’s first formal mentoring program for surgical trainees is being launched this month.

SWIM (Surgeons and Women’s Initiative to Mentor) has been created by a team from the School of Surgery, consisting of Professor of Surgery Christobel Saunders, Research Officer Aimee Nichevich, School Manager Ms Carleen Ellis, and Professor of Medical Education Jeff Hamdorf.

The idea to develop a formal mentoring program came about from previous research conducted by Professor Saunders, Ms Nichevich and Ms Ellis. While investigating the career choices of female surgeons in Australasia, the researchers identified several barriers to the pursuit of a surgical career. Two of the major obstacles were a lack of available career mentors and under-exposure to same-sex role models.

Such a finding is important as surgical Faculties throughout Australasia try to address the disproportionate ratio of males to females and encourage the next generation of academic surgeons. WA universities are no exception.

Currently, more than half of medical undergraduates at UWA are female yet only about one-tenth of both non-academic and academic surgical appointments are held by women. Recognising this, the UWA Equity and Diversity Office awarded the SWIM program with a 2009 Diversity Initiative Grant.

The SWIM program aims to address these obstacles by providing one-on-one mentoring for females early in their surgical careers.

Each mentee will be paired with an appropriate mentor taking into account factors such as their career interests and professional goals. Some of the highlights of the program include networking events, a Women in Leadership guest presentation and a research award for the highest calibre publication or abstract authored by a trainee during 2008/09. The award will support the recipient’s travel, registration and accommodation at an Australasian conference of their choice.

The SWIM program has been actively recruiting male and female mentors from a broad background of surgical specialties over the past two months. The SWIM committee are now looking to recruit mentees - female surgical trainees or recent medical graduates with a keen interest in a surgical career.

Following evaluation of SWIM at the end of the year, the objective will be to use this program as a model for surgical Faculty in other states who wish to implement a formal mentoring program – for both female and male surgical trainees.

Anyone who would like to discuss participating in SWIM can contact Professor Saunders at christobel.saunders@uwa.edu.au or by telephone on 9346 2146.
New Clinical Applications Unit - research into practice

In a bid to prevent mental health patients from falling through cracks in the health care system, a new unit was established last year to improve the coordination of mental and physical care.

The Clinical Applications Unit (CAU), headed by Dr Daniel Rock at the Centre for Clinical Research in Neuropsychiatry (CCRN), translates mental health research findings into care coordination packages, leading to improved outcomes for patients.

Dr Rock said another result was cost savings to the health system.

“When a person has complex health needs which cross the jurisdictional boundary between mental and physical health care, they can be easily lost in the system,” he said.

“Better coordination of care within and between agencies not only improves quality of life but at the same time spends health dollars more effectively.”

Research carried out by CCRN and the WA Department of Health has shown high levels of physical co-morbidity among people with mental illnesses. CCRN director Professor Assen Jablensky, who carried out some of the research, said the findings were disturbing.

“We found that the physical health status of psychiatric patients was exceptionally poor, people with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder faring worst,” he said.

Part of the problem was not so much under-detection or missed diagnoses but under-treatment.

“People with mental health problems are less likely to receive quality care for quite common physical problems,” he said.

CAU has four principal areas of focus - reproductive and sexual health, co-morbidity, suicide and deliberate self-harm, and clinical assessment of psychosis.

The Mental Health Early Life Program (M-HELP) is centred on reproductive and developmental health and its first package, Healthy Babies for Mothers with a Serious Mental Illness, was officially launched last year by Telethon Institute for Child Health Research director Professor Fiona Stanley (see story in MeDeFacts, September 2008).

Dr Rock said mental health case-management was fundamental to the M-HELP philosophy.

Under the direction of midwife Professor Yvonne Hauck and child psychiatrist and paediatrician Dr Johanna Stefan, the M-HELP projects aim to ensure adequate ante-natal care provision, child health nurse support of vulnerable women and their children in the immediate post-natal period, and practical help with bonding and attachment in the first two years of life.

CAU’s most recent package, which involves quick follow-up care for patients who deliberately self-harm, was launched last month (see story opposite page in this issue of MeDeFacts).

It followed the CAU’s “Fast tracking care for deliberate self harmers in Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital emergency department” project, which aimed to develop and implement an integrated system of psychiatric triage and assessment, incorporating new clinical pathways for deliberate self harm presentations to SCGH’s ED.

Another directly related project was the “Modelling suicide following hospitalisation for self-inflicted injury (deliberate self harm) study”, which will generate a statistical model for suicide following hospitalisation for self-inflicted injury.

Dr Rock said although this group of patients was at overall increased risk for suicide, the composition of the group’s suicide risk-related characteristics was not known.

“A database, using de-identified information from a set of linked health registers, will be used to create the primary dataset for this study,” he said.

Dr Rock said cancer care coordination was another pressing issue. Mental health patients had the same chance of developing cancer as the general population but research in WA in 2000 showed that their chances of being cured were much lower.

“Conventional cancer treatment is complex, strictly timetabled and often tightly regimented, placing intense demands on a person’s family and support network,” he said. “But for someone who is also living with a mental illness and with limited social support, accessing adequate cancer care can become almost impossible.”

A person’s chance of surviving cancer is increased if they can successfully engage with treatment in the first few months after being diagnosed.

“If people with pre-existing mental illnesses can get practical support to manage their treatment, then their chance of surviving cancer will increase,” Dr Rock said.
Deliberate self-harm: a quick response

A project ensuring that patients who present to emergency departments with deliberate self-harm receive rapid follow-up care was launched last month.

The system links the post-discharge care of the patients to the resources of the GP-based Perth Primary Care Network (PPCN), which will offer follow-up and ongoing support to all patients, with contact occurring within three days of discharge.

The service follows the consumer from hospital to GP and enhances communication and shared care.

The project is an initiative of the North Metropolitan Area Mental Health Services’ new Clinical Applications Unit (CAU), based at the Faculty’s Centre for Clinical Research in Neuropsychiatry.

It was prompted by the fact that deliberate self-harm is a significant problem which would benefit from additional care pathways.

Between 1970 and 1996, there were 33,321 hospital admissions in WA for a self-inflicted injury. This translates to more than 1,000 admissions every year, on average.

There are also about 11 hospitalisations for deliberate self-harm for every death by suicide. Effective follow-up can reduce the number of deaths and re-presentations and ensure that people who deliberately self-harm receive the help they need to recover.

CAU director Dr Daniel Rock said the project was not about re-inventing the wheel.

“Patients can be best managed by the most appropriate existing services, with various feedback mechanisms built into the clinical pathway to minimise the number of individuals lost to follow-up,” he said.

Other hospitals using a similar approach have demonstrated its cost-effectiveness. A pilot program for the integrated management of self-poisoning in the Hunter region of NSW reduced average length of stay by about one day to about 3.5 days, saving 1470 bed-days each year.

Ms Gayle Corbould, Senior Project Officer at CAU, said knowing there would be community-based follow-up could reduce the feeling of frustration and impotence experienced by many general hospital staff when dealing with deliberate self-harm presentations.

“Care coordination for deliberate self-harm is a more efficient use of existing resources,” she said. “It can reduce admissions to inpatient care from the emergency department and prevent readmissions and re-presentations.

“It will also provide more consumers with better access to the most appropriate services after discharge.”

CAU decided to tackle the problem head-on by first undertaking an audit of the pathways of care offered to people who deliberately self-harmed and who were subsequently discharged from the ED at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital.

Ms Corbould met representatives from the Ministerial Council on Suicide Prevention and the Coroner’s Office and held discussions with the hospital GP liaison officer and members of the ED mental health team, which highlighted gaps in care for people who deliberately self-harm.

She said talks with people who use mental health services at the public Consumer Mental Health Forum held in November last year also offered valuable insights.

Ms Corbould, who has worked as a social worker in SCGH’s ED, helped with the first hospital audits on deliberate self-harm and suicide attempts presenting at the ED.

The audits enabled the hospital to develop a service specifically targeting young people presenting with deliberate self-harm. Later, this expanded to include all deliberate self-harm presentations and indicated a need to develop risk-assessment and problem-solving interventions.

In collaboration with the Royal Perth Hospital ED mental health team, CAU trialled a system to record all mental health presentations to the ED. The plan now is that RPH and SCGH EDs will uniformly record data that will capture the characteristics of this group of patients, especially those who re-present.
Dearth of podiatrists jeopardises health of country patients

Rural health care needs more support and incentives to make it a more attractive career option for health care graduates, according to a final year Podiatry student.

Heidi Chin said a limited number of podiatrists were struggling to service various towns with large numbers of patients. This had ramifications for the podiatrists and the patients.

“A great number of patients requiring urgent care experience difficulty in obtaining appointments,” she said. “This has disastrous implications, not only for the health system, but especially for high risk diabetic or renal disease patients who have diabetes or renal disease, where small wounds may result in serious ulcers, infections or amputations.”

Professor Alan Bryant, Head of Podiatric Medicine, said there was a significant shortage of podiatrists around Australia, largely due to the demand for podiatry services outstripping the supply of university graduates. It was particularly apparent in rural and regional areas.

“The situation is considerably worse with respect to remote areas of WA where the prevalence of diabetes related foot problems is high and the provision of podiatry services remains low and, in many areas, non-existent,” he said. “I understand that the WA Health Department and the few private practices in larger rural centres have considerable difficulty in attracting and retaining podiatrists.

“To help address this problem, our final year students are being encouraged to undertake an optional two to four week rural placement in the hope that this may lead to a few graduates eventually practising in the country rather than in the Perth metropolitan area.”

Ms Chin said she would definitely consider rural practice on completion of her Bachelor of Podiatric Medicine degree.

She recently completed a rural clinical placement with the Avon and Central primary health service, based in Northam, the major inland town of the Avon valley.

“It provided insight into working in a rural community and was extremely rewarding in terms of gaining invaluable personal, professional and clinical skills,” she said.

The placement involved treating patients at Northam regional hospital and in the neighbouring towns of Quairading, Narrogin, Merredin and Goomalling hospitals.

“In a rural setting with an ageing population, the Falls-Clinic ‘Stay on your Feet’ program is an especially important one,” Ms Chin said. “Falls for people aged over 65 years cost the health system $83 million in 2001–02, about 1.5 per cent of the total health expenditure in WA, and are a serious health issue affecting the mobility and independence of the individual.

“I was fortunate to accompany podiatrists who assessed, diagnosed and treated conditions ranging from dermatological conditions to biomechanical and systemic disease.

“GP’s, nurses, occupational therapists, dieticians and physiotherapists were also involved, emphasising the importance of team management skills in the prevention of falls in the elderly.”

The podiatrists involved in the Falls-Clinic were also required for custom footwear advice. Physical conditions such as loss in muscle strength, poor flexibility at the hip, and loss of strength in the upper body and back, leading to gait changes, were addressed.

Ms Chin later spent time at the Aboriginal health clinic, where she treated many patients of various cultural backgrounds, encountering literary problems and linguistic barriers.

“This challenged me professionally, forcing me to employ other strategies to ensure communication was effective in order to maximise certainty in diagnosis, appropriate therapy and patient compliance,” she said.

“I also gained an understanding of the importance of Aboriginal health workers, who provide a link between the Aboriginal community and mainstream health services.”

Heidi uses Doppler ultrasound technology to perform Ankle Brachial Pressure Index measurements, which aid in the diagnosis of peripheral arterial disease, and to evaluate the quality of blood flow in the lower limb. These measurements are mandatory in the vascular assessment of diabetic patients.
Mr Bell said he and his wife Peggy decided to donate the money for the Bell Research Fellowship for Health and Ageing to accelerate research into Alzheimer’s.

“We are in our 80s now ourselves and we are very conscious of people our age having their mental faculties deteriorating,” he said. “We have had friends who have had very bad results from that.

“And also there doesn’t seem to be enough research or understanding of the problem.”

Alzheimer’s Australia estimates there are at least 227,300 people with dementia in Australia and this is expected to more than treble to about 731,000 by 2050 unless there is a medical breakthrough.

The Bells established their own charity foundation, the Ron and Peggy Bell Family Legacy, about six years ago and it is from the Legacy that the funds for the Research Fellowship will be drawn.

Through the Legacy, they have also donated $100,000 to support medical services for an Indian village called Kandilli, two hours from Bangalore.

Mr Bell visited the village recently for two weeks to see the fruits of their funding.

“We actually have a medical centre there which we staff with local people but two or three times a year we send a team of doctors and nurses there to give more detailed medical help,” he said. “We pay for the operations and other things that are required.”

In fact, it was a chance conversation with one of the GP volunteers from WA that led to Mr Bell being put in touch with the Faculty, after he mentioned he was interested in helping fund research into Alzheimer’s.

Mr Bell said he had enjoyed a varied life, with careers ranging from accountancy to cattle farming and commercial property investment.

“I always had this idea I would leave a big legacy in my will,” he said. “But I got to thinking I had a direct interest myself so we got the idea we wouldn’t wait until we died, because we were a bit slow about doing that, so we created the Foundation.”

The Bells have five children, three of whom are UWA graduates. One of their granddaughters is in her third year of study at the University.

The Bell Research Fellowship for Health and Ageing will be supplemented by the WA Centre for Health and Ageing (WACHA), which appointed Ms Vidovich.

WACHA has the impressive track record of having raised $11 million in research funding over the last five years and currently holds 20 research grants.

WACHA Director, Professor Leon Flicker, and Research Director, Professor Osvaldo Almeida, and their colleagues are busy piecing together the puzzle that is dementia.

Growing old is the most powerful risk factor for the development of dementia but other probable risk factors, common to heart disease, include mid-life high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, high cholesterol and lack of exercise. In addition, depression, low education, limited ongoing intellectual stimulation, limited social connectedness and severe head injury are potential risk factors.

Additionally, there are some genetic factors that may predispose people to developing the common forms of dementia in old age. The role that genetic factors play in dementia is the area that Ms Vidovich will pursue.

Ms Vidovich, who is a clinical neuropsychologist at WACHA, she said a concerted effort was needed to help Australia’s ageing population avoid the burden of cognitive dysfunction.

“As the population ages, the risk of dementia increases and presently there are no cures,” she said. “The financial gift from Mr and Mrs Bell will be put to good use to explore practical ways to change this.”

-By Cathy Saunders

(from left) Inaugural Research Fellow Ms Mandy Vidovich, donors Mrs Peggy Bell and Mr Ron Bell, and Dr Penny Flett, Chair of the executive committee of the WA Centre for Health and Ageing, at a “thank you” and acknowledgment ceremony for the Bells this month.
A team of volunteer healthcare workers from Australia ventured into one of the most dangerous zones of South Africa last September to treat and help the poor and homeless. They stayed in an AIDS hospice in Johannesburg and were not allowed outside the razor-wired compound without the protection of local staff.

When they did travel to outreach health centres, their patients were frisked for drugs and weapons before being allowed through for treatment. But what they achieved under those conditions, and with the most basic equipment, was staggering.

Clinical Associate Professor Albert Tan, a periodontist and part-time staff member in the School of Dentistry, and Dr Elizabeth Day, a general dentist in private practice, were among a team of two doctors, two dentists, two general nurses, two dental nurses, an art therapist, and a social worker who gave up two weeks last year to minister care to hundreds of patients in the neighbourhood of Hillbrow in Johannesburg.

They went there under the auspices of Equal Health, a volunteer organisation based in WA but which recruits nationally. The bulk of its work has been carried out for the past 13 years in India, where about 60 volunteers visit every year. For the last five years a small group of 10 has also gone annually to South Africa. This year, because of the violent crime rate, a team will not be sent.

Dr Day was inspired to volunteer because she wanted to combine travel with the desire to provide pain-relief and palliative care to the poor, sick and homeless.

“Working in comfort in our private practices insulates us from the thousands of people who desperately need dental treatment and pain-relief but who either cannot afford it or are unable to access a clinic,” she said. “Helping those in need is such a personally rewarding way to give, albeit in a very small way, to a less fortunate society.”

Clinical Associate Professor Tan was moved to volunteer because he was inspired by the work of his friend Paul Clark, an optician in Karrinyup, who founded Equal Health over a decade ago. “After more than 30 years in the field of periodontics, it was time to give something back,” he said. This was reflected by the dental team treating more than 300 patients of all ages, sometimes working late into the night.

They had only hand instruments and local anaesthetics with which to treat patients. There was no dental chair, no X-ray facilities, and no dental light, drill or suction. The medical team members supplied a variety of medicinal drugs which they had brought with them from Perth. Education in oral hygiene was important and toothbrushes and toothpaste were given to all who presented for treatment.
A significant proportion of patients treated were medically compromised with HIV or advanced AIDS and some had the added complication of tuberculosis. In these patients, pain relief and providing comfort was the goal.

One of the more destructive forms of periodontal disease, acute necrotising ulcerative gingivitis/periodontitis (ANUG/P) was relatively common, especially as a complication of HIV-AIDS. “In my general practice I would see one case of ANUG/P every three years, but there we saw eight obvious cases within days,” Dr Day said. “This would be mainly due to their compromised general health, lack of good nutrition, poor oral hygiene, heavy smoking and alcohol consumption, all combining to cause a breakdown in body resistance.”

Clinical Associate Professor Tan and Dr Day scored every patient according to a periodontal disease severity/treatment needs index, and found the majority across all age groups had significant periodontal disease. They were treated using periodontal hand instruments supplemented by antiseptics and/or antibiotics in some cases. Teeth with decay that were considered salvageable were filled, and those that were not, were extracted. About 100 teeth were extracted during the two weeks.

The team’s initial work was treating staff and patients in the AIDS hospice run by Metropolitan Evangelical Services (MES) in the Hillbrow neighbourhood of Johannesburg, where crime and violence are rampant. “It was a pretty dangerous suburb,” Clinical Associate Professor Tan said with a degree of understatement. “It is the typical cycle of poverty, despair and crime.”

The team also went out to five different community venues, ranging from a ship’s container, which served as the “sick bay”, to a hall, a church and night shelters. Posters were placed around the area to promote the free dental and medical services available on those days. A van did the rounds, collecting people from the streets who needed to see a doctor or dentist.

“These people live in abject squalor,” Clinical Associate Professor Tan said, describing the rat-infested disused multi-storey car parks where people set up camp.

Many shied away from government-run clinics, often because they were illegal immigrants. A big number were from Zimbabwe. However, they felt safe going to the free non-government sick bay.

“We kept looking out the window to see if the queue was getting shorter but it never did,” Clinical Associate Professor Tan said. “The hardest part was when we had to turn them away at the end of the day.”

By Cathy Saunders
registration as a Registered Nurse, pending accreditation of the course by the Nurses and Midwives Board of WA.

Moreover, 50 Federally-supported nursing places have been awarded to UWA for this course so students can pursue the degree without having to pay fees up front. The places are along similar lines to HECS places, in that students repay the fees at the end of the degree, once they start earning a wage.

The association with the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, which supports an evidencelbased, research-informed approach to clinical practice, is deemed another benefit.

The course will be conducted by the School of Population Health in partnership with Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital.

Professor Judith Finn, Chair in Nursing Research in the School of Population Health, said there had been 102 expressions of interest in the course, which will start in July. The first round of applications have just opened, with the second round to follow in May/June.

The degree follows two other innovative degrees introduced by the Faculty in the SPH last year. They are postgraduate degrees for nurses - the Master of Public Health (Nursing), a specialised coursework program within the Master of Public Health, and the research-based Master of Nursing Research, which includes a research thesis and core units in research methods.

The new nursing course has been introduced because of the desperate shortage of nurses nationally and worldwide, which is likely to increase in the future, with population growth and the ageing population.

“This offers another avenue into nursing,” Professor Finn said. “Historically anyone with a degree who wanted to be a nurse would have to go back and do another Bachelor’s degree. This offers people an opportunity to get a Master’s degree as well as registration as a nurse.”

The curriculum has been modelled on the Melbourne University Master of Nursing Science, which is now in its second year of running. “Talking to Melbourne University, they have graduates from science but also from humanities, business, accounting (undertaking the nursing degree),” Professor Finn said.

“There is sometimes a misconception that you have to have a science undergraduate degree but they have actually found a better indicator is how well the students did in their undergraduate degree, not what they did.”

The two-year full-time degree is quite intensive and comprehensive. There are clinical placements in the summer and winter university breaks.

There are 800 hours of clinical practice, which is the requirement of the Nurses and Midwives Board of WA.

Professor Finn said most of the clinical practice, including general, medical, surgical, acute care and aged care nursing, would be at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital. “It is something we see as a plus because most of the other university nursing courses are traditionally practised in lots of different hospitals and students don’t get a sense of belonging to any particular organisation,” she said.

There had been an increasing recognition that the range of nursing experiences could be gained in a single hospital, which gave the students a more consolidated clinical training. However, students would need to go to Princess Margaret Hospital or Fremantle Hospital for child health placement and to Graylands Hospital for their mental health placement, she said.

They would also have three weeks of rural training, which would be run by the School of Primary, Aboriginal and Rural Health Care.

Registered nurses can work in a range of specialties including intensive care, paediatrics, theatre nursing, community nursing, health promotion, medical specialty nursing, surgical specialty nursing, aged care, remote community nursing, and nursing research.

-By Cathy Saunders

(by left) Nurses Carl, Ben and Pippin in consultation
Scholarships put nurses on PhD path

Four registered nurses are pursuing PhD studies this year through the School of Population Health, with the help of substantial external scholarships.

All four receive $25,000 annually for the three years of their postgraduate degree.

Sonya Rogal was the inaugural winner of the Olive Anstey scholarship, which was introduced last year and is fully funded by the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital Nursing Services. She is studying patient outcomes of in-hospital cardiac arrest and the factors associated with maximising the survival rate.

The winner of the second Olive Anstey scholarship is Louise Schreuders, who has taken up her studies this year. She has been a student of the UWA Master of Public Health degree and has worked with Professor Judith Finn, Chair in Nursing Research in the Centre for Nursing Research at SCGH, as a research officer.

She will look at nurse-sensitive outcomes, which are patient outcomes that can be attributed to the quality of nursing care. These include pressure sores and infection rates.

Olive Anstey, who was the Director of Nursing at SCGH from 1963 until the year before her death in 1983, was a staunch advocate for better working conditions and pay for nurses which she saw as synonymous with improving care for patients.

She also agitated for improved education and the formal development of nursing knowledge through research.

Two other nurses are studying with the aid of National Health and Medical Research Council scholarships.

Linda Coventry won the funding last year and is looking at heart disease in women, and the gender differences in rates of heart attack.

The same scholarship was awarded this year to registered nurse Sally Wilson, who is examining the indicators of the quality of nursing care in paediatric nursing.

Professor Finn, who is a PhD graduate from the School of Population Health, said that modern-day nursing practice needed to be informed by sound clinical research and as such it was pleasing to see an increasing number of nurses enrolling in postgraduate research degrees at UWA and securing competitive scholarships.

She has supervised another nurse, Teresa Williams, now a nurse researcher at Royal Perth Hospital, who was also a NHMRC PhD scholarship awardee. She submitted her PhD thesis for examination late last year and is awaiting the examiners’ reports. Her topic was Long-Term Outcomes for Patients Treated in the Intensive Care Unit.
The word is out - faculty in the news

Quoted As Saying

The West Australian:
Professor Fiona Stanley, Director of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, is QAS an Australian-first study will look at the impact of developmental disorders and mental health problems in childhood on educational problems, child abuse, neglect and crime. TiCHR and researchers from UWA and Curtin University have been awarded almost $10 million in funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council to conduct a study tracking the early development of thousands of children from the womb to gauge the effect of social, economic and environmental factors on their health and wellbeing. “A new approach is needed because of the increases we’re seeing in a whole range of problems affecting children, from obesity to autism,” Professor Stanley said.

Dr Emma Dove, Research Associate in the School of Medicine and Pharmacology, is QAS that while lupin bread has been shown to help with obesity, a new trial would be the first to look at its impact on diabetes. A study by the WA Institute for Medical Research's Centre for Food and Genomic Medicine published in January found that overweight people who ate about four slices of lupin bread a day had lower blood pressure than those who ate white bread. The team will now test whether the legume can level blood glucose in people with diabetes. “What generally happens after a person eats or drinks is that their blood glucose level rises, so what we are trying to pinpoint is whether lupins could help stabilise those levels to avoid a spike and help people manage type 2 diabetes more effectively,” Dr Dove said.

Professor John Newnham, Head of the School of Women’s and Infants’ Health, is QAS the link between obesity and birth defects was becoming well-established and the message to women planning children was clear. “Obesity is bad for women and bad for their pregnancies,” he said. He was commenting on a British meta-analysis which found overweight pregnant women were more at risk of having a baby with a heart abnormality or a neural tube defect such as spina bifida.

Dr Linda Slack-Smith, Senior Lecturer in the School of Dentistry, is QAS many hospital admissions of children under five years of age for dental disease were preventable through good diet, basic oral hygiene and fluoridated water. She led a study which found children aged under five in the Bunbury region, where the water is not fluoridated, were twice as likely to have been in hospital because of dental problems.

Australian Doctor:
Mr Stan Wisniewski, Clinical Lecturer in the School of Surgery, is QAS marijuana is known to diminish male fertility through damage to sperm-producing cells. “And it wouldn’t take a big leap from there to speculate that if there’s damage to the spermatogonia, that may trigger a malignant transformation,” he said. He was commenting on a study in the journal Cancer which found that men who smoke marijuana are at higher risk of developing testicular cancer than non-users.

Emeritus Professor Lou Landau, of the School of Paediatrics and Child Health, is QAS any atopic mother should have an explanation of known risk factors for atopy in her baby, and be told that Caesarean section was one possible risk. However, the reasons for a surgical delivery could be more powerful than any potential risks, he said. He was commenting on a study in the journal Thorax which showed that children born by Caesarean section are more likely to develop asthma later in life. The study of almost 3000 children found the association was strongest among those whose parents were atopic. However, children born by Caesarean section with non-allergic parents still had a 36 per cent increased risk of developing asthma by age eight, compared with children delivered vaginally. Emeritus Professor Lou Landau said the association between children with non-allergic parents and asthma was weak and had other possible explanations, such as the prevalence of babies in the study with no siblings – a factor known to increase asthma risk.

Alumni society grows, helps with job hunting

The Health Science Alumni (HSA) hopes to set up a career mentor scheme as part of its scope of activities.

It is already helping former students with job-seeking by circulating information on vacant positions to all graduates, regardless of whether they are members of the society.

HSA member Victoria Gray, a Graduate Research Assistant in the School of Population Health, said if graduates needed help, they often emailed the HSA for advice or submitted their CVs.

The society aims to become part of the UWA Career Mentor Link, run through the Careers Centre.

“But Health Science itself is quite good for networking,” Ms Gray said. “You get to know people from across the years and you have unofficial mentors.”

The society, which was instigated as the result of a third year student assignment, has grown to a membership of 50 in less than 12 months since it was launched last April.

HSA secretary Ania Stasinska, who is an Associate Lecturer in Health Science in the SPH, said a survey of alumni showed they were interested in professional development on topics such as research-related skills, job hunting and project management. They also wanted a lecture series from industry experts.

In response, the HSA is running a variety of events, ranging from professional development to seminars and social functions. It intends to have an event each year at the time of graduation in order to introduce new graduates to HSA members.

There have been about 170 graduates since the degree was introduced, with the first students graduating in 2003. Graduates from the combined and single Health Science degrees are employed in Federal and State government departments, universities, the private sector and non-government organisations.
Dental avulsion study a knockout

A group of students in the School of Dentistry who won a prestigious national prize for research are part of a new generation of dental students making important findings that are being widely aired.

Seven students now in fifth year had their research into treatment of dental avulsion presented in a poster at the recent annual congress of the ANZ division of the International Association for Dental Research (IADR).

The conference was held in Perth in October with participants from dental schools in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Carla Graneri presented the poster and won second prize in the junior section of the IADR/Unilever Hatton Divisional Award.

As a result, she will fly to Miami next month to deliver the research results at the international IADR meeting, which will be attended by dental researchers from around the world. The prize includes flights, accommodation and registration.

“This is a fantastic opportunity for Carla to showcase research from the UWA School of Dentistry,” study supervisor Dr Linda Slack-Smith said.

Carla represents the research group which consisted of Erin Hardie, Se Von Fong, Hanna Gee, Sigourney Henneker, Roy Goonewardene, David Humphries and herself.

The research was completed as a requirement of the fourth year Paediatric Dentistry unit co-ordinated by Dr Boyen Huang.

The study assessed the level of knowledge of spectators at children's sporting events in Perth with regard to the management of dental avulsion, an urgent dental emergency in which the tooth is knocked out of its socket. Immediate management greatly affects long-term prognosis.

The results, from a cross-sectional survey of spectators at junior basketball, football, and hockey events, found many parents and spectators were not aware of the immediate management of tooth avulsion.

However, most were able to correctly identify measures to prevent tooth avulsion, such as mouthguards.

“This study detected a need for effective dental injury education aimed at parents and sporting spectators and the importance of first aid availability for such situations,” the researchers concluded.

Dr Slack-Smith said the research would be written up by the students for submission to the Australian Dental Journal.

“They are part of a new generation of dental students coming through who are undertaking research and who will hopefully contribute to research in the future in the School of Dentistry,” she said.

“It is unusual for students to present internationally. But I think that is changing. They have more in their curriculum about undertaking research and the School research activity is increasing as we increase our staff.

“We have students graduating with refereed publications.”

One third year dental student is writing her third paper on a series of projects, having had one published already.

Dr Slack-Smith said she had read the history of the IADR and she believed John McGeachie was the only person who had received an award at the national competition for support to present internationally, in 1969. He is now Professor of Anatomy and Human Biology and for three years was Head of the School of Dentistry, a position he relinquished at the beginning of 2003.

Showcasing surgical research

By Aimee Nichevich, Research Officer, School of Surgery

Research ranging from new spinal devices to an artificial eardrum was showcased in the School of Surgery’s recent research symposium.

The School of Surgery is one of UWA’s newest Schools and encompasses clinicians, researchers and students from a wide variety of backgrounds. They include burns surgeon Professor Fiona Wood and her team, renowned researchers in orthopaedics and ear surgery, clinical researchers in vascular surgery and breast cancer, musculoskeletal and gait experts, and molecular biologists investigating causes of colon cancer.

The research symposium is a forum for colleagues in these disparate areas to present their research activities and findings.

The recent program focused on the research activities of the School’s diverse postgraduate students. The presentation topics also covered burns treatment, and breast cancer and pregnancy, and were of a very high standard. The symposium provides an ideal speaking opportunity for postgraduate students to acquire and improve on the skills required to effectively communicate and disseminate their research findings.

Postgraduate research prizes were awarded in three categories. The award for the most outstanding publication (2007) in clinical (human) studies went to Angela Ives, a PhD student of the General Surgery Unit for her work on pregnancy and breast cancer. For in vitro (scientific) research, the equivalent prize was received by Jimin Chen, a PhD student of the Centre for Orthopaedic Research for his work on tendon and ligament repair. The prize for the most outstanding postgraduate presentation at the symposium was awarded to Rebecca Crawford of the Centre for Musculoskeletal Studies. Rebecca is developing and testing a spinal implant to help alleviate chronic back pain.

The prizes were sponsored by Johnson and Johnson Medical.

The School of Surgery would like to acknowledge all the symposium sponsors - Roche Pharmaceuticals and AstraZeneca Oncology.
Flipping hamburgers to pay the rent and stock the fridge, to the detriment of their studies, will hopefully be a thing of the past for some dental students, thanks to an Assistance Fund being financed generously by the Western Australian Dental Foundation.

A total of $500,000 will be endowed for the WADF Assistance Fund and it is expected that up to $25,000 annually will be available to help dental students in financial difficulties and to facilitate projects and activities within the School of Dentistry. These projects can have a wide range of focus and may include special equipment or travel support for a postgraduate or undergraduate student presenting a paper at a conference or attending a symposium.

Clinical Associate Professor Albert Tan, recently elected as Chair of the WA Dental Foundation, said there were some dental students in need who would otherwise have to do paid work during their arduous degree and this could adversely affect their studies.

“It is based on the well established medical model of helping students,” he said. Last year, one dental student was working so many hours in a restaurant that he had little time to study and needed to repeat the year.

The WADF was established in 2003 by UWA dental graduates and aims to provide support to the School of Dentistry through a range of activities such as professional development opportunities for dentists, enhanced study experience for students and fundraising projects.

Clinical Associate Professor Tan said the WADF was also keen to embark on a special project to raise $120,000 over the next year for the establishment of a scholarship for a student entering dentistry through the Outer Metropolitan Program. This program is part of the Aspire program and actively encourages academically able students from areas under-represented in higher education to consider a career in dentistry.

Dr Tan announced the establishment of the Assistance Fund and scholarship project at a “thank you” event hosted by the Foundation and Office of Development last month to acknowledge the generous and ongoing support of the WADF Fellows and members over the years. It was attended by 45 of the 235 donors.

Dr Terry Pitsikas, immediate past chairman of the WADF, who was also the inaugural chairman, was thanked for his outstanding contribution to the WADF. Without his enthusiasm and determination, the WADF would not have been established for the benefit of dental education at UWA and future generations of students at the University.

For information about the WADF Outer Metropolitan Scholarship Program, please contact Ms Fabienne Vonarburg on 6488 4211 or email fabienne.vonarburg@uwa.edu.au