Celebrating 30 years of Australian Rotary Health

Anthony F Jorm, Michael G Sawyer and Joy Gillett

How one man's vision to fund health research grew to become the country's largest non-government funder of research into mental illness

The Australian Rotary Health (ARH), a uniquely Australian organisation operating under the auspices of Rotary International (a worldwide organisation of humanitarian service clubs) that allows Rotary clubs to support health research. From small beginnings, ARH has evolved to become a key non-government funder of research relevant to preventing and treating mental illness.

ARH had its birth in 1981, when Ian Scott, a bank manager from Mornington in Victoria, heard a radio interview about the tragedy of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and the lack of funding available for research into the problem. He resolved to do something about it. As a member of Rotary, Ian approached his club with an ambitious proposal to set up a research foundation, with a principal of $2 million to provide funds for health research, and the initial grants to be allocated to research into SIDS.[1]

Scott's aims were achieved within a few years. By 1983, the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund had been established, and in 1985 the first grants were given for research into SIDS. By 1987, the initial goal of raising $2 million had been reached through appeals to Rotary clubs and Rotarians to donate some of their fundraising money to ARH. The organisation had spectacular success with its initial grant funding, when a study investigating the incidence of SIDS in Tasmania identified prone sleeping position of infants as a key risk factor.[2] Within 5 years of this finding, promotion to parents of the importance of infant sleeping position led to a dramatic decline in the incidence of SIDS.[3] Subsequently, ARH gradually grew and supported research in a range of other areas including environmental health problems of the aged, adolescent health, family health, Ross River virus, and first aid and emergency care.

A major change in direction occurred in 2000, when it was decided that ARH would fund mental illness research. This decision was in response to the Global Burden of Disease Study, which found that mental illness was a major source of disease burden and the biggest source of disability globally,[4] and findings from the 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, which showed that around one in five adults in Australia were affected with mental disorders in a 12-month period.[5] The move into mental illness research was strongly supported by senior policymakers in the then Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.[1] Support for mental illness research has continued for

over a decade, and ARH is now the largest non-government funder of research in this area. During this time, ARH has also offered PhD scholarships and postdoctoral fellowships, and supported research symposia. Support from ARH has complemented research funding provided by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) by focusing on more applied projects, particularly intervention research, that offer more immediate benefits to the community. ARH has also supported work in its earliest stages, when research questions and ideas are still evolving and data are needed to guide planning for larger-scale proposals. It has been a major source of support for emerging areas such as prevention of mental illness in children and adolescents, and innovative approaches to treatment such as e-therapy.

A strong partnership has developed between ARH and the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, which has encouraged ARH to broaden its focus beyond supporting research. This reflected the recognition by policymakers that Rotary clubs had the potential to play an important role in destigmatising mental illness, because their membership encompasses influential members of local communities who could lead the way for greater understanding and acceptance of people affected by mental illness. To facilitate this work, the Department funded ARH to run community forums on mental illness across Australia. This involved Rotary clubs organising meetings in their local community where mental health professionals, people with mental health problems and carers presented information and personal experiences, and local mental health services promoted what they had to offer. More recently, the Department has engaged ARH to increase community understanding of mental illness by supporting Rotary clubs to deliver Mental Health First Aid courses in their local communities.[6]

Despite the significant support that ARH provides to Australian health research, the demand for funding continues to greatly exceed the available funds. In 2010, ARH was only able to fund 10% of applications it received for mental illness research projects. To overcome this problem, ARH is broadening its base of support beyond Rotary clubs, which have to date been the major sources of donations. In 2011, ARH will launch a national appeal to the Australian public for funding to support mental illness research.

Over 30 years, ARH has grown from one man's vision to fund health research to become an organisation that plays a key role in supporting research relevant to mental illness, funding research training, and advocating for the needs of those with mental disorders. This reflects the recognition by ARH of the benefits of involving Rotary clubs as agents for health promotion and stigma reduction, rather than simply as a source of research funds. No other country has involved Rotary clubs in this way, but we believe it is a model that deserves to be emulated.

Competing interests

Anthony Jorm has received grant funding from ARH and receives travel support to attend Research Committee meetings. Michael Sawyer is a member of the Board of ARH and an honorary member of the Mitcham Rotary Club in South Australia.

Author details

Anthony F Jorm, PhD, DSc, FASSA, Professorial Fellow,[1] and NHMRC Australia Fellow
Michael G Sawyer, MB BS, PhD, FRANZCP, Head of Research and Evaluation Unit,[2] and Professor[3]
Joy Gillett, OAM, Chief Executive Officer[4]

1 Orygen Youth Health Research Centre, Centre for Youth Mental Health, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC.
2 Children, Youth and Women's Health Service, Women's and Children's Hospital, Adelaide, SA.
3 Discipline of Paediatrics, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA.
4 Australian Rotary Health, Sydney, NSW.
Correspondence: ajorm@unimelb.edu.au

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