

In profile: Natalie El Haber



When NARI PhD student Natalie El Haber arrived in Australia from Beirut at the age of 11, she had no knowledge of English – but possessed an enormous drive to succeed.

"I made work my priority even when I was younger. I never planned what I would do academically – it was just meant to be," she says.

Natalie has a Bachelor of Science with honours from the University of

Melbourne. For her PhD research, she was initially awarded a Melbourne Research Scholarship and, more recently, a scholarship from Osteoporosis Australia.

Her study involves testing twins to determine why fractures run in families. Results show that a person's balance is moderately influenced by genetics.

She has definitely found her niche in clinical work: "I like being with people. I also like seeing results and the improvements that are occurring."

Natalie enjoys the friendly atmosphere at NARI and the support of her supervisors Dr Keith Hill, NARI's Director of Preventive Health and Public Health, and Professor John Wark at the University of Melbourne.

She has presented her findings at several Australian and overseas conferences, and is quietly modest about the interest her work has generated.

Overseas students

NARI's innovative work in public health research attracted the interest of Stephanie Gray (left) and Jeanie Iverson, from Slippery Rock University in America.

Stephanie and Jeanie, who are physical therapy doctorate students, are spending four months at NARI doing clinical work and research.

Jeanie is involved with vestibular rehabilitation where inner ear problems can result in balance problems and falls. Stephanie is working on a study that tests people's higher mental function – like planning and problem solving – and falls risk.



Community focus

Making a difference to people's lives is the impetus for NARI Director Professor Allan McLean's involvement in two community programs.

He is on the management committee for Vision 2020, Australia's first comprehensive public eye health campaign. It is part of an international Right to Sight project to eliminate avoidable blindness and vision loss by 2020.

"Older people need to have their eyes tested for age-related problems. Vision impairment affects independence, mental health and quality of life," he says.

Professor McLean also had a key role in redesigning Victoria's subsidised taxi fare system, and he is now an expert consultant to the management committee.

"The system changed to assess people's needs on the basis of disability rather than medical diseases. An important aspect of older people's physical and mental health is being able to go out and socialise," he says.

Make research a priority

Giving priority to research into healthy ageing was high on Professor McLean's agenda during a visit to NARI by Dr Jade Sharples, the science adviser to Brendan Nelson (Minister for Education, Science and Training).

This was a follow-up to Professor McLean's presentation on behalf of a working group to the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council.

The group's vision includes a strategy for increasing physical activity in older people, researching the potential of food and nutrition to reduce chronic diseases, and establishing a national network for healthy ageing research.

In the media

NARI was in the media spotlight recently with its innovative research into healthy ageing.

- "Use it or lose it" was Professor Allan McLean's key message about exercise and older people when interviewed for television's *Today Tonight*.
- The humble bean is on the menu for NARI research fellow Dr Irene Blackberry, whose research into diet and longevity was featured twice in the *Herald Sun*. In her seven-year study into the world's longest-living cultures, the Mediterranean diet, which incorporates legumes, came out ahead of other lifestyle factors, like social activity and feelings of wellbeing.





Ageing Well

National Ageing Research Institute

34 – 54 Poplar Road, Parkville Victoria 3052 (Postal address: PO Box 31, Parkville Victoria 3052)
Telephone: 03 8387 2148 Facsimile: 03 9387 4030
Email: info@nari.unimelb.edu.au Website: www.nari.unimelb.edu.au

Newsletter Issue 35
June 2005

Print post approved PP341 403000444

A time of transition



"NARI's research interests have always been unusually broad for a medical research institute," says NARI Board President, Alan Castleman (pictured).

"Most institutes are highly focused on a concentrated area of research, usually bio-medical, whereas NARI, although a small institute, has always had several streams of activity. These include public health research, education, pain management, falls prevention and bio-medical research."

He says that NARI has become more involved in collaborative work with other institutes and this will increase, particularly in biological research where other institutes have greater resources.

"In the public health area, NARI has a great opportunity to contribute to more efficiently preventing, treating and managing problems associated with ageing, and can probably make its greatest impact on people's quality of life and national health care costs," says Mr Castleman.

NARI consultant, the Honourable Michael MacKellar, says, "One institute cannot cover every aspect affecting healthy ageing, but NARI can become the focus for exchanging information and initiating projects with other institutes in Australia and overseas."

Former Health Minister advises NARI

NARI consultant, the Honourable Michael MacKellar, may have stepped away from politics, but he is still doing what he enjoys best – helping to make a difference to people's lives.



For 25 years, he was in federal politics, which encompassed stints as Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Minister, and Health Minister during the 1970s and early 80s.

"The health portfolio was immensely varied. I was particularly interested in research and technology and traditional medicine, and also the move to complementary medicine," he says.

Since 2002, he has been responsible for corporate and government strategies and relationships for NARI. Last year, he was delighted to join the Board and become more involved in the Institute.

Originally from country NSW, he studied agricultural science at Sydney University, and agricultural economics and international trade at Oxford University.

"I have always worked with individuals and groups of people to try to help them solve their problems," he says.

This was the pattern in his early work with farmers, then politics, and later when he was responsible for establishing the peak industry association for the plastics and chemical industries, and oversaw the redevelopment of the Baker Heart Research Institute.

Although he jokes about feeling a practical association with NARI's work, he adds, "NARI is making important advances in ageing research and healthy ageing. Given Australia's demographics, there should be wider interest in this whole area."

Alcohol increases breast cancer risk



Women with a high risk of breast cancer increase their chances of having this life-threatening disease if they drink alcohol, warns NARI senior research fellow Dr Lisa Demos.

STORY PAGE 2



Alcohol increases breast cancer risk (continued from page 1)

The link between breast cancer and alcohol consumption – for women at high risk of this life-threatening disease – needs to be publicised widely, advises NARI research fellow Dr Lisa Demos.

“Raising women’s awareness will enable them to make informed decisions about this aspect of their lifestyle,” she says.

This key finding by Dr Demos and NARI Director, Professor Allan McLean, emerges from a literature review, to develop national guidelines for alcohol use in people aged 65-plus, for the Department of Health and Ageing.

“Even consuming two-and-a-half standard drinks daily leads to an increased risk of several cancers, including colon, liver and larynx,” says Dr Demos. She emphasises that the amount of

alcohol in one large glass of wine is 180mls, which is closer to 1.8 standard drinks rather than one standard drink.

While alcohol has no protective effect against cancer, some health benefits can be gained depending on a person’s health and family history of risk factors. The project revealed that drinking two to four standard glasses of alcohol over a week lowered cholesterol, and decreased the risk of heart attacks and ischaemic stroke (caused by reduced blood flow).

Dr Demos stressed that older people responded differently to alcohol because of changed body weight and composition, decreased liver metabolism, increased sensitivity to alcohol, and possible interaction with some prescribed and over-the-counter medications.

Spotlight on pain management



NARI’s Director of Clinical Research, Associate Professor Stephen Gibson, shared his considerable expertise at two conferences earlier this year.

International Psychogeriatric Association scientific meeting in New Zealand

The link between debilitating pain and depression was the theme of his keynote address to 500 medical and allied health professionals from over 40 countries.

“Depression and anxiety are common when people are in pain. They become socially isolated and their whole outlook on life deteriorates. Although a depressed person may report pain, our research shows that this usually involves a physical component,” he said.

Australian Association of Musculoskeletal Medicine conference in Noosa

Professor Gibson discussed the epidemiology of pain and the age differences in pain pathways.

A healthy snapshot

“I want to be able to get out and about, maintain independence, keep (in) contact with friends and families, socialise.”

“I believe in a lot of Eastern philosophies. I believe if you change your thought set you will probably be healthier than what you are now.”

Physical, social, mental and spiritual wellbeing encompassed the definition of health for more than 70 people from Melbourne and country Victoria, surveyed by NARI research fellow Betty Haralambous, and colleagues Kirsten Black, Melita Giummarra and Joan Nankervis.

Maintaining independence was another important aspect identified by older people and service providers in the ten focus groups.

Ms Haralambous said the impetus for the study, funded by the Victorian Department of Human Services, was to fill the information gap about older people’s concept of health and wellbeing, and provide an insight into the motivation and barriers for a healthy lifestyle.

Service providers were also asked about their role in health promotion.

Other key findings were:

- Psychosocial aspects, especially the media, attitudes to ageing and social roles, influenced people’s outlook.
- Health providers needed to work with older people in setting goals.
- The lack of services and also people’s access and knowledge about them were barriers to health promoting activities.
- Social networks and support from family, friends and the family doctor were important for people’s independence and health.

\$50,000 grant for pain project

A \$50,000 grant to enable nurses to better manage pain in patients has been awarded to NARI’s Director of Clinical Services, Associate Professor Stephen Gibson, and Dr Elizabeth Manias from the School of Nursing at the University of Melbourne.

This innovative project, funded by the Victorian Nurses Board, involves nurses being individually mentored by experts in pain management as they care for patients. The one-year program will be at St Vincent’s and St George’s Hospitals.

What a difference!

"I felt no one was helping me and no one cared until I went to NARI," says Margaret Le Clercq, who has suffered from loss of balance for more than a year.

She did the rounds of doctors and specialists without success, and then her daughter's search on the internet revealed information about vestibular (inner ear) problems and NARI's Community Balance Screening Service.

She attended the screening service for an assessment in April and a fortnight later, she returned to discuss the results with a physiotherapist specialising in balance and mobility.

"At NARI everyone was attentive and it felt good to have my problem finally recognised. I was shown simple exercises to do at home and I am also attending a community falls prevention program," she says.

For details about the Community Balance Screening Service: 8387 2200

No dizziness from this world-first study



People with chronic problems of dizziness and loss of balance – caused by either single or multiple parts of the inner ear – significantly improved their balance after an eight-week exercise program, a world-first NARI study has revealed.

This finding by physiotherapist Kate Murray for her PhD research was contrary to medical literature that suggested limited improvement if multiple parts of the inner ear were affected.

The majority of participants, whose average age was 40, had suffered vestibular dysfunction for nine months, with the longest time-span being 30 years. Generally, their problems stemmed from a virus, and one-third had hearing loss and tinnitus (ringing in the ears).

After initial testing at the Alfred or Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospitals, participants received a home exercise program suitable for their functional level. Their progress was assessed at eight weeks and six months.

Those with symptoms for less than six months obtained the best results.

"The inner ear provides input to the eyes and also affects balance. Doing exercises to coordinate the eyes and head, and also balance exercises stimulate the inner ear and encourage recovery," says Ms Murray.

"People were quite disabled by their problems and had issues related to work or driving a car – so they were very well motivated to do the exercises."

The Garnett Passe and Rodney Williams Memorial Foundation funded the two-year study.

Better balance now

NARI's relatively new Community Balance Screening Service is already achieving strong results.

"Most people involved in our specially devised exercise programs have improved their balance and feel more confident about doing everyday activities," says Dr Keith Hill, who is NARI's Director of Preventive Health and Public Health.

The screening service, which was launched last August, has mainly assessed people who have had falls. However, Dr Hill advocates a preventive approach to falls and suggests that anyone worried about balance should consider an assessment.

The service determines whether balance problems are part of normal ageing or early signs of problems that require attention.

A series of simple tests assess balance and mobility. If a problem is identified, options include individual home exercises or community-based exercise programs.

We are leaders in ageing research. Your donation will help us maintain the pace.

Looking to the future, Australia will have six million people over the age of 65 by the year 2050. They will comprise 25 per cent of the population.

The issues surrounding ageing are complex. At this time of life, the major health concerns include diseases of ageing, dementia, falls, wounds and pain management.

NARI leads the way in Australia as the only Institute for ageing that takes research from cell biology to service delivery and public health. We need your support to continue our work.

Please find enclosed my donation of \$.....
Name
Address
..... Postcode
Telephone

I enclose a cheque payable to
the **Ageing Well Foundation** OR

Please debit my credit card for \$

Bankcard Mastercard Visa
 American Express Diners

Credit card number
Expiry date.....
Signature.....

Please post this coupon with your donation to:

**National Ageing Research Institute
PO Box 31 Parkville, Victoria 3052**

Thank you