

In profile: Dr Bruce Barber - the music man



Dr Bruce Barber has had an amazing musical journey – from the heady days of playing in the original productions of *Hair* and *The Rocky Horror Show* to starting a PhD at NARI, at the age of 48, to examine brain electrical patterns associated with music.

Along the way, he always embraced new opportunities and the challenge of change.

“The knowledge that you acquire about yourself and the world around you through music is unique. People value music most for its expressive qualities and, for many, music has a profoundly spiritual component,” he says.

Soon after leaving school, he pursued his dream of being a musician, playing drums and percussion.

Inspired by instrumental teaching, he completed a four-year Bachelor of Education in Music during his mid-30s. He taught in technical schools and then at Box Hill TAFE’s music program, where students were focused on music as a career. His next move was to the University of Melbourne Institute of Education to train music teachers. During this time, he began his PhD at NARI.

“Under the pressure of teaching, musicians tend to imitate behaviours they disliked in their own music teachers. To break that cycle, I wanted my students to use their own knowledge and thinking when teaching, and I thought it might be useful to have some objective information about the way we acquire musical knowledge. This led me to NARI,” says Dr Barber.

He researches pain in people with dementia and also the apparent beneficial effects of music on people with dementia.

“Our work has shown that even in late stage dementia, when people have lost the capacity for language, they invariably respond to music. Music implants itself deeply into a person’s autobiography. Powerful associations evoke positive emotions and stimulate health and wellbeing,” he says.



Like father, like son

German medical student, Hauke Heinzow, seems to be following in his father’s footsteps by being at NARI with Professor Allan McLean.

His father, Birger, did his post-doctoral studies with Professor McLean in

In brief....

The Chinese connection

NARI signed a co-operative agreement with leading health officials from the Shaanxi province in China that opens the way for exchange programs for students and staff, and joint research projects.

The delegation’s visit in late December followed a six-month stay at NARI by World Health Organisation visiting fellow, Dr Li Sun.

See Ageing Well, December 2005, page 3: Interest from China

Hitting the headlines

An *Australian Financial Review* article in March featured pioneering liver research by NARI Director, Professor Allan McLean, and Professor David Le Couteur, the Director of the Centre for Education and Research on Ageing at the University of Sydney.

Professor McLean’s concerns about malnutrition in older people and inappropriate medication doses were highlighted in *The Australian* story, titled “Fed or Dead”, in April.

The pilot study by Dr Briony Dow and Kirsten Black, of providing computers to carers in country Victoria to reduce their social isolation and depression, was featured in an article in *The Age*, in January.

Expert advice online



During April and May, Associate Professor Keith Hill shared his expertise online at seniors.gov.au about being physically active for good health.

He participated in the interactive Q & A Forum on the seniors website, which is part of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing website. People asked questions that were answered by an expert panel.

Melbourne, from 1980 to 1982; he is now a regional director of toxicology at the State Agency for Nature and Environment, in Kiel.

“German medical students have the opportunity to do an overseas elective as part of their course,” says Hauke.

“Australia is a wonderful country. I only wish I could remember more about what I did with my parents when I came here as a child. I will have to come back after graduation to experience a bit more.”

Hauke is working on NARI’s integrated care program to prevent secondary stroke.

**See page 1: More interest in stroke program*



Ageing Well

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Prestigious award for Associate Professor Gibson



Associate Professor Stephen Gibson is one of only six researchers worldwide to be awarded a prestigious Pfizer Visiting Professorship in pain management.

The University of Florida Comprehensive Pain Research Centre, in America, nominated Associate Professor Gibson to share his expertise to help establish a \$US5 million research unit for pain and ageing.

"This is one of the biggest pain research laboratories in the world and I will be

working with an internationally renowned team. It is an honour to have been considered for the award," says Associate Professor Gibson, NARI Deputy Director (Clinical Research).

He will spend about two weeks at the Florida research centre in November. The award also includes a stipend of \$US7,500.

"I will discuss NARI's work and where the future of ageing research should head, from a basic and also a clinical perspective," he says.

"Research still tends to focus on better ways of measuring pain, which is important, but it is time to progress beyond that stage. Research needs to tackle the more difficult questions, like how does pain differ in older people when compared to younger people and the modifications required when treating pain in older people."

Heading to the top

Associate Professor Stephen Gibson continues to step up the executive ladder of the Australian Pain Society, a commitment that will span nine years.

After recently completing his term as director of the society's Victorian branch, he was nominated president-elect of the national body. The positions of president-elect, president and ex-officio each comprise a three-year term.

"The Australian Pain Society influences clinical practice and also government policy on pain management.

"Chronic pain is now recognised as a major public health problem worldwide. This health problem costs Australia about \$9 billion annually, and is a major cause of people being unable to work," says Associate Professor Gibson.

Detecting unsafe drugs

Identifying unsafe drugs in the elderly could be a step closer in a new NARI program funded by the CSIRO that taps into one of Australia's largest databases.

"The database at the Department of Veterans' Affairs links every aspect of medical, health and hospital care for veterans," says NARI Director, Professor Allan McLean.

"Identifying 'rogue' drugs becomes easier when events before and after their introduction are available. Yet, few databases in the world have such links.

"The research will enable us to detect if any new drugs are safe or unsafe. This tends to be particularly difficult to isolate when people are on multiple medications."

The pilot study is focusing on blood pressure lowering drugs, which is one of the biggest spending item on the PBS and repatriation PBS.

More interest in stroke program

NARI's integrated care program to prevent patients having a second stroke continues to expand nationally, with plans to incorporate Tasmania, particularly its rural areas.

In February, consultant neurologist Dr Jacques Joubert, who heads the stroke project, and NARI Director, Professor Allan McLean, discussed the model with the Head of Medicine at the University of Tasmania, Professor Hayden Walters. The integrated model of care involves a stroke coordinator being the link between a patient's GP (the primary medical carer) and the specialist stroke services.

Other states already involved in the program are NSW and Western Australia.

On the international scene, Dr Joubert outlined the stroke project to neurologists in France, in April. The following month, he spoke at the Third National Disease Management Conference in Singapore, and also with the Stroke Disease Management Workgroup at the National Healthcare Group.

"Worldwide, older people face the same problems," says Professor Joubert.

"As well as telling our international colleagues about Australian treatment successes, we also learn about their projects and, ultimately, that translates to better care for Australian patients."



Involved in the successful stroke project: (from left) Dr Jacques Joubert and newly appointed research fellow, Dr Toby Cumming. Also on the team is NARI Deputy Director (Operations and Development), Dr John Barlow, and visiting German student, Hauke Heinzow.

▶ Visit NARI's exciting new website
www.nari.unimelb.edu.au



NARI reviews exercise guidelines

Older people with health problems can benefit from being physically active, though activities may need to be adapted for them.

This key concept is the basis of NARI's draft recommendations for physical activity for older adults to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

NARI was commissioned to review the research evidence, and reassess and modify the existing physical activity recommendations for adults to ensure they were appropriate for older people. The draft recommendations were circulated for community comment before being presented to the Department of Health and Ageing for consideration, in May.



Members of the research team enjoy a tai chi session: (from left) Lisa Engel, Emma Dunning (from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing), Dr Nancy Huang, Sue Hunt, Dr Jane Sims and Betty Haralambous.

Project Team

FROM NARI

Associate Professor Keith Hill – study project manager
Dr Jane Sims Betty Haralambous Sue Hunt

EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP

Dr Annette Brown – physiotherapist from Perth
Lisa Engel – diabetic nurse educator from Melbourne
Dr Nancy Huang – National Heart Foundation
Dr Ngaire Kerse – University of Auckland, New Zealand
Professor Marcia Ory – Texas A&M University System Health Science Centre, USA

Successful pain conference

Associate Professor Stephen Gibson headed the organising committee of the successful 26th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Australian Pain Society, in Melbourne, in April.

The four-day conference, which attracted almost 600 delegates, explored 'Pain Across the Lifespan'.

One new concept was the 'how-to' sessions, where participants gained practical skills in tasks like examining the back for pain and helping patients in pain to sleep better. For the first time, all presentations will be published in the journal, *Anaesthesia and Intensive Care*.

More information please

Older Chinese people consider falls an important health issue but they have little knowledge about falls prevention, falls risks or allied health services available in the community.

These are among the findings by Xiao Jing Yang, who investigated this cultural group's knowledge of falls at NARI, for her Master of Science degree at Victoria University. A total of 15 participants shared their experiences.

"They tend to go to the doctor after they have a fall and need information. As they lack fluency in English, they would prefer information about falls prevention to be in their own language, and publicised in the Chinese media and also on posters at doctors clinics and community centres," says Jing.

Her study supervisors were Betty Haralambous from NARI and Dr Jocelyn Angus at Victoria University.

- Jing has commenced a PhD at NARI on evaluating early balance problems in veterans.



Jing with NARI study supervisor Betty Haralambous.

Veteran volunteers needed

NARI is seeking 360 veterans and war widows for a research project on early identification of balance and mobility problems, and the benefits of an exercise program to improve these problems. The project is funded by the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

To participate, a veteran or war widow must:

- Be living at home
- Be aged over 65 years
- Walk at least three times weekly, without using a walking aid or using only a single-point stick
- Have had no more than one fall in the past 12 months
- Be concerned about balance or confidence when walking

For details about volunteering contact Sarah Tarquinio: 8387 2614

Volunteers for arthritis study

Are you a female suffering from osteoarthritis or rheumatoid arthritis in the leg joints? Then read on...

NARI and the Rheumatology Department at the Royal Melbourne Hospital are researching balance, falls risk and exercise for people with arthritis.

The project is funded by the JO & JR Wicking Trust.

The research involves:

- Testing balance, walking ability and falls risk using NARI's sophisticated technology
- An individual home exercise program
- Retesting after four months to evaluate progress

For details about volunteering contact Sue Hunt or Sue Williams: 8387 2200



Making medicines safer for older people

Medication use is recorded in the traditions of folk medicine, dating back thousands of years. In Western medicine, the high public regard for pharmaceutical use comes from the antibiotic 'miracles' of the previous century. Their widespread effectiveness was evident against normally fatal illnesses, and showed very few side-effects.

The modern use of pharmaceuticals in older people is not such a simple story. Adverse reactions to drugs (ADRs) is a frequent cause of death and illness in older people, yet medication studies that reveal benefits are rarely performed in this age group – Government regulators and drug companies rely on testing in younger people.

ADRs are the fourth-to-sixth largest cause of death in older people, and drug-related toxicity involves one-in-four hospital admissions for this age group. One important side-effect from ADRs is falls. Hospital admission rates in Australia from injury following falls – more than 100,000 annually – is more than double the total admissions from injuries in road accidents.

Little evidence exists for judging the benefits of new drugs in older people. In the year 2000, only 3.45 per cent of 8,945 randomised controlled clinical trials and 1.2 per cent of 706 meta-analyses involved people aged over 65 years. When proper trials are performed, long-established medications are often shown to be more effective than newer ones.

A recent American study – the ALLHAT Trial – showed that a thiazide diuretic reduced blood pressure as effectively as the most recently developed medicines. It also showed better support for the heart and better protection against stroke, than some very commonly prescribed medications for blood pressure.

Our knowledge of the reasons for altered effects of medicines in older people is increasing rapidly. We expect to be able to add more drugs to the World Health Organisation (WHO) list of drugs most harmful to older people. Despite WHO, some drugs on the caution list are very commonly prescribed – benzodiazepines, such as Valium and Mogadon, are the best-known examples.

Other issues influencing harmful outcomes of drugs in older people include altered responses to the action of medicines (including the effects of disease), interactions with other drugs taken at the same time, and slower elimination of drugs from the body.

**Professor Allan McLean
NARI Director**

Further reading: *McLean AJ & Le Couteur DG. Pharmacological Reviews 56:163-284 (2004). To obtain a copy: email NARI at info@nari.unimelb.edu.au or phone 8387 2305.*

Recommendation - Any older consumer being offered a prescription of a 'marvellous new drug', should be extremely cautious and ask for details of its proven benefit for older people.

International interest in NARI haemophilia study

"I have suffered tendonitis in my left leg (between the calf and ankle) for several years. Since being on this program I haven't had a sign of it."

Kevin, aged 58

A pioneering NARI research project to improve balance problems in people with haemophilia has captured international interest.

"The study, funded by the Haemophilia Foundation of Australia, has generated amazing interest because the research is so unique," says Associate Professor Keith Hill, NARI Director of Preventive and Public Health. He presented the study's preliminary results at the International Haemophilia Conference in Vancouver, in May.

"The project clearly indicates balance problems in people with haemophilia, particularly as the disease progresses. Anecdotally, participants are commenting that the exercise program is beneficial, but improvement can only be validated when participants are retested," says Associate Professor Hill.

NARI research assistant Marcia Fearn and Professor Alison Street and staff from the Ronald Sawers Haemophilia Centre at the Alfred Hospital are also involved in the research.

"People with haemophilia have bleeding into joints that can cause premature arthritic problems. Eventually, affected joints become stiff and painful.

"Physiotherapy usually focuses on strength and joint flexibility, rather than balance. Our preliminary results suggest that balance should be considered as a preventive step," says Associate Professor Hill.

NARI needs your help

We are a self-funding research institution committed to healthy ageing.

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