The NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use (CREMS) was officially launched on 30 January 2013 by the Hon Tanya Plibersek, Australian Minister for Health and the Hon Mark Butler, Australian Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, Minister for Social Inclusion, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Mental Health Reform (pictured above with CREMS Chief Investigators). The NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Suicide Prevention was also launched at this ceremony, which was held at the University of New South Wales (UNSW).

Professor Les Field, UNSW Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) chaired the opening, which was attended by over 100 of Australia’s leaders in mental health and drug and alcohol research, policy and practice.

The presence of both Ministers at the opening highlights the importance of this area to the health of Australians. Australian’s with mental health and substance use disorders have a life expectancy 20-30 years less than their peers without these disorders. Over 300,000 Australians will have comorbid mental health and substance use disorders and many will not receive adequate care and treatment.

One of the first aims of CREMS is to break down the silos between the fields of mental health and drug and alcohol. To have so many leaders from across both mental health and drug and alcohol together for the launch was a fantastic way to start. We are looking forward to conducting new research and working together towards the translation of that research with our clinical and policy partners. Health Minister Plibersek says this is an important step in helping our most vulnerable people from “falling through the gaps”, but a “whole of nation” effort is needed.
AN UPDATE ON OUR PREVENTION RESEARCH

By Dr Nicola Newton

The prevention stream is one of three streams making up CREMS. The aim of the prevention stream is to develop, evaluate and disseminate evidence-based resources to prevent substance use and mental health problems in young people.

The prevention stream is made up of a range of academic staff (Dr Nicola Newton, Prof Maree Teesson, A/Prof Tim Slade, Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin & Dr Emma Barrett, UNSW; Prof Bonnie Spring & Dr Brian Hitsman, Northwestern University, USA), research staff (Ms Katrina Champion, Ms Erin Kelly, Mr Dan Rodriguez, Ms Zoe Tonks, Ms Louise Birrell & Ms Natasha Nair, UNSW) and clinical staff (Ms Julia Rosenfeld, Newcastle University).

Our focus is on developing innovative interventions which are sustainable, cost-effective and easily implemented. One such resource is the effective Climate Schools programs for drug prevention which have been shown to reduce alcohol and cannabis use among Australian secondary school students. These programs are now available free of charge at www.climateschools.com.au.

Our current research includes a large NHMRC grant to assess the effectiveness of an integrated model to prevent alcohol and cannabis use, as well as anxiety and depression. This study is known as the Climate Schools Combined project and will include schools from NSW, WA and QLD. We have also moved into our third year of evaluating the effectiveness of the CAP study; a comprehensive substance use prevention program which combines the universal Climate Schools programs with personality-targeted interventions for high-risk students called Preventure.

In addition to our research trials, we are involved in developing resources for schools. Most recently, we have been contracted by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing to produce resources on illicit drugs and related harms for secondary school students, teachers and parents as part of the National Drugs Campaign.

We currently have two students completing PhDs in the prevention stream. Both students will be presenting their work at the Society for Prevention Research conference in May in San Francisco, USA.

Katrina Champion is developing and evaluating the first trial of an internet-based prevention program for ecstasy use.

Erin Kelly is developing and evaluating an internet-based program to reduce bullying and substance use.
Smoking among people with mental health and alcohol and other drug problems

I have just returned from two exciting conferences in the United States. The Society on Research into Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) Conference was held in Boston, Massachusetts, and the Society for Behavioural Medicine (SBM) was held in San Francisco. At both conferences, key presentations from distinguished researchers highlighted the continued high prevalence of smoking among people with mental health and substance use problems.

At SRNT Professor Karl Fagerstrom called for a revision of the way smoking is addressed, with less emphasis on hard endpoints like abstinence, and adoption of a chronic illness model. In line with this model, smoking reduction (and eventual abstinence) and multiple change attempts are encouraged. Mental health problems like depression as well as alcohol and other drug use may also need to be addressed at the same time to enhance improvement in smokers. At SBM Professor Steven Schroeder similarly called for smoking to be addressed among people with mental health and drug and alcohol problems, pointing to its high prevalence, and association with poor quality of life and reduced longevity. It was wonderful to hear enthusiasm for Australia’s plain packaging legislation and positive regard for our forward thinking and energetic response to smoking.

Multiple health behaviour change

It is well known that health risk behaviours bundle together and many, if not most, people with mental health and substance use problems also have poor diets and low levels of activity. Here in Australia, I have been leading a research group intervening in multiple health behaviour change among people with severe mental disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Together with Dr Pete Kelly, from the University of Wollongong, we have also been addressing smoking, activity and diet among people in residential substance abuse services. So far, we have had some very encouraging results. Pete and I intend running some workshops beginning this year to assist clinicians in delivering these healthy lifestyle interventions, face to face, in group contexts, or by telephone. Together with Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin we are also starting to evaluate online healthy lifestyles modules.

Dr Pete Kelly and Prof Amanda Baker at the Society on Research into Nicotine and Tobacco Conference held in Boston
Comorbidity plus!

It may seem daunting at first to address co-existing mental health and substance use problems let alone additional risk behaviours. However, evidence is beginning to accumulate to suggest multiple health behaviour change is possible and may even assist behaviour change. What behaviours, in what order, and how many to address at once are some of the issues that CREMS will be researching over the next five years.

In April, Dr Louise Thornton will be taking up a post-doctoral position at Northwestern University, Chicago, under the supervision of Professor Bonnie Spring, Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin and myself. Multiple health behaviour change and its scalability via telephone and computer among people with mental health problems will be the subject of this research.

An NHMRC funded randomised controlled trial examining the efficacy of behavioural activation therapy (BAT) for the treatment of depression among people with opiate dependence is also about to commence in Sydney. BAT focuses on changing behaviours in order to improve mood, rather than thought or cognitions. This study is being led by Dr Joanne Ross, Prof Maree Teesson, Dr Katherine Mills, and Dr Sharlene Kaye (UNSW); Prof Carl Lejuex (University of Maryland, USA), Prof Kathleen Brady (Medical University of South Carolina, USA), and Dr Glenys Dore (Northern Sydney Area Health Service).

Dr Emma Barrett is a Research Fellow and Forensic Psychologist. Despite being at an early stage in her career, Dr Barrett has shown exceptional skill in relation to her research on comorbidity, having been directly involved in three randomised controlled trials (RCT’s) of interventions designed to treat substance use and comorbid mental health conditions. Her specific area of interest lies in examining associations between substance use, trauma and aggression.

Dr Barrett completed her PhD in 2012 under the supervision of Dr Katherine Mills. Her doctoral thesis comprised a series of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using population-level and clinical sample data to examine anger and violence among individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The common occurrence of PTSD among individuals with SUD presents a significant challenge to treatment providers. In particular, individuals with this comorbidity can present with high levels of anger and an increased risk for violent behaviour.
Among a number of notable findings, Dr Barrett’s research revealed that PTSD hyperarousal symptoms, in particular are significantly and independently associated with the perpetration of violence among individuals with a SUD. These studies present valuable information for clinicians identifying individuals prone to anger and violence and for the development of targeted interventions designed to reduce these adverse outcomes.

Following on from this research, Dr’s Barrett and Mills collaborated with Dr’s Devon Indig and Sandra Sunjic (NSW Justice Health) and Prof Lisa Najavits (Boston University) on a NSW Health funded study designed to trial an intervention for the treatment of comorbid substance use and trauma in prison settings. Substance use and trauma are almost universal among prisoners, however, research identifying effective treatment programs for this marginalised population is scarce. Importantly, the findings revealed that treating this comorbidity is both feasible and acceptable within this setting. Dr Barrett plans to carry out further research to determine the efficacy of integrated treatments for this population.

Recently Dr Barrett shifted her focus to adolescent populations. Her research among adults with comorbid SUD and PTSD highlighted the extremely high rates of childhood trauma exposure and the early onset of these disorders. In 2012 Dr Barrett coordinated the implementation of a RCT examining an intervention to prevent substance use and related harms among Australian adolescents (the CAP study). Over 3,000 students from 27 secondary schools in NSW and Victoria were recruited into the trial, and Dr Barrett plans to examine longitudinal relationships between substance use, aggression and high risk personality profiles in this adolescent sample.

In addition, Dr Barrett recently applied for NHMRC funding with Dr Mills, Prof Maree Teesson, Dr Joanne Ross (CREMS), Dr Vanessa Cobham (University of Queensland) and A/Prof Sudie Back (Medical University of South Carolina), to conduct the first RCT of an integrated exposure-based treatment of comorbid substance use and traumatic stress among adolescents. By intervening early in the trajectory the enduring disability associated with this common comorbidity may be reduced.

Dr Barrett has received a number of awards for her research thus far, including the 2010 UNSW Deans List for Excellence in Research and the 2012 UNSW Kevin Rozzoli Community Impact Award. She has also been invited to present her research at numerous national and international conferences.

As Research Fellow within CREMS, Dr Barrett plans to continue to develop her program of research in the area of substance use, trauma and aggression. Specifically, she will develop, evaluate and translate effective interventions aimed at addressing comorbidity and reducing the propensity for violence among these populations.
Congratulations!

Dr Pete Kelly has been awarded a 3-year Fellowship from the Cancer Institute (NSW) to trial a healthy lifestyle intervention within residential substance abuse services provided by The Salvation Army. Dr Kelly was also the ‘First Ranked Fellow’ for this round of the funding scheme. The intervention (The Healthy Recovery Program) is an eight-session group based program that aims to prevent cancer for people who are attending substance abuse treatment.

Three competitive PhD scholarships have recently been awarded to CREMS members. Katrina Hammall was awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) to develop and evaluate a group-based treatment for families that include children living with a chronic physical illness, designed to improve family resilience, mental health and wellbeing. Kathryn Woodcock and Katrina Champion have both been awarded scholarships from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC). Kathryn’s PhD will focus on developing and evaluating internet-delivered treatments for current/previous Australian Defence Force personnel and their families targeting lifestyle issues and those related to trauma. Katrina’s PhD will examine internet-based interventions for substance use prevention in adolescents.

The work of two CREMS members was recently recognised at an in-house awards event held at NDARC, Sydney.

The NDARC Awards, held annually, were presented by Prof Michael Farrell (Director of NDARC and CREMS Associate Investigator).

Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin, CREMS Director of Online Treatment Research, received the Ian Webster Award for Outstanding Research Achievement. Dr Emma Barrett was presented with the Kevin Rozzoli Community Impact Award.

Dr Christina Marel has been awarded an Early Career Investigator travel award by the United States National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) to attend the American Psychological Association’s Annual Convention in Honolulu, Hawaii. Dr Marel will be presenting her work examining longitudinal predictors of criminal involvement among people with heroin dependence who participated in the Australian Treatment Outcome Study.

Conference presentations

The 2013 Medicine in Addiction Conference was held on 15-17 June in Sydney. CREMS members gave presentations on mental health comorbidity (Prof Maree Teesson), Hepatitis C treatment (Prof Paul Haber), alcohol and pregnancy (Dr Lucy Burns), and addiction in forensic settings (Prof Michael Farrell); and workshops on interventions for post traumatic stress disorder (Dr’s Glenys Dore and Katherine Mills). Many of these presentations may be downloaded from the conference website.
RECENT PUBLICATIONS


UPCOMING SEMINARS/WORKSHOPS/EVENTS

MAY 2013
National Summit of Mental Health Ministers, Sydney
Federal Minister for Mental Health, Mark Butler, and NSW Minister for Mental Health, Kevin Humphries, announced this upcoming Summit to address the high rates of premature death and adverse health outcomes amongst people with mental illness.

16 MAY 2013
International Society for Research on Internet Interventions Bi-annual Conference, Northwestern University, Chicago
Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin will be presenting on serious gaming design in depression and binge drinking for young people, and internet–delivered Healthy Lifestyles Treatment (iHeLP) among smokers with comorbid mental health problems.

5-8 JUNE 2013
International Federation of Psychiatric Epidemiology Conference, Leipzig, Germany
A/Prof Tim Slade is presenting on the impact of sex and birth cohort on the transition from alcohol use to DSM-IV alcohol use disorders, and Dr Wendy Swift will be giving a presentation on adolescent predictors of alcohol use disorders in young adults.

31 JULY 2013
American Psychological Association Annual Convention, Honolulu, Hawaii
Dr Katherine Mills will be presenting on predictors of treatment outcome among individuals undergoing integrated treatment for substance use and PTSD, and Dr Christina Marel will present on the longitudinal predictors of criminal involvement among people with heroin dependence.
MEMBERS

CHIEF INVESTIGATORS
- Prof Maree Teesson
- Prof Amanda Baker
- Dr Katherine Mills
- Dr Frances Kay-Lambkin
- Prof Paul Haber
- A/Prof Andrew Baillie
- Prof Helen Christensen
- Prof Max Birchwood
- Prof Bonnie Spring
- Prof Kathleen Brady

POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH FELLOWS
- Dr Heather Buchan
- Dr Christina Marel
- Dr Kirsten Morley
- Dr Louise Thornton

RESEARCH PSYCHOLOGISTS
- Ms Jenny Gedes
- Ms Sally Hunt
- Ms Julia Rosenfeld
- Dr Alyna Turner

RESEARCH OFFICERS
- Ms Louise Birrell
- Ms Joanne Cassar
- Ms Xanthe Larkin
- Ms Natasha Nair
- Ms Katrina Prior
- Mr Daniel Rodriguez
- Ms Zoe Tonks
- Ms Joanne White

PHD CANDIDATES
- Ms Katrina Champion
- Mr Mark Deady
- Ms Miriam Forbes
- Ms Amy Johnson
- Mr Warren Logge
- Ms Sonja Memedovic
- Ms Mikki Subotic
- Ms Kris Tulloch

ASSOCIATE INVESTIGATORS
- Ms Leonie Manns
- Mr Trevor Hazell
- Prof Robyn Richmond
- Dr Cath Chapman
- A/Prof Tim Slade
- Prof Brian Kelly
- Dr Brian Hitsman
- Dr Leanne Hides
- Dr Pete Kelly
- Ms Marion Downey
- Prof Michael Farrell
- Dr Glenys Dore

RESEARCH PSYCHOLOGISTS
- Ms Jenny Gedes
- Ms Sally Hunt
- Ms Julia Rosenfeld
- Dr Alyna Turner

SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOWS
- Dr Nickie Newton
- Dr Joanne Ross
- Dr Wendy Swift

RESEARCH OFFICERS
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- Ms Joanne Cassar
- Ms Xanthe Larkin
- Ms Natasha Nair
- Ms Katrina Prior
- Mr Daniel Rodriguez
- Ms Zoe Tonks
- Ms Joanne White

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- Ms Sandi Steep

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- Dr Ali Beck
- Dr Natacha Carragher
- Dr Sharlene Kaye
- Dr Matthew Sunderland

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS
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- Prof Michelle Moulds
- Ms Jaelea Skehan