

Reporting positive outcomes

Kristine Ash* advises on the approval of research grants.

It is always satisfying to report positive outcomes, especially when they change lives. The Coeliac Research Fund (CRF) is now delighted to feed back good news in relation to two of our major initiatives – supporting research and improving awareness and diagnosis.

RESEARCH GRANTS ANNOUNCEMENT

Funding research and lifting the profile of coeliac disease in the medical research community is a primary objective of the CRF. Although modest in comparison with National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grants, the CRF grants allow researchers to gather preliminary data so that they can compete more effectively for the highly prized NHMRC funding; only one in five research proposals received by the NHMRC is successful despite most being considered competitive.

Based upon the processes adopted by the peak Australian research body, the NHMRC, each proposal received by CRF was evaluated by three expert reviewers for scientific rigor, feasibility and significance. The grant review process was coordinated by a member of our Clinical Advisory Committee who was not applying for funding himself, and all funding decisions were made without the knowledge of the applicants, other members of the Clinical Advisory Committee and members of the CRF board.

It is with great pleasure that I can now announce the successful

grant recipients of our 2009 Grants Program. The research projects funded by the CRF in 2009 are:

THE EFFECT OF PLANT ENZYME SUPPLEMENTATION ON DUODENAL HISTOLOGY IN COELIAC PATIENTS MAINTAINING A GLUTEN FREE DIET.

Professor Finlay McCrae and his research team at Melbourne Health will investigate plant enzyme therapy in the management of coeliac disease. During a six week trial treatment some volunteers will eat gluten whilst others will be given a placebo. The changes in the gut will be monitored and villous atrophy assessed before and after the research period as well as the level of tTG in the blood. The project will evaluate the effectiveness of the plant enzyme supplementation.

AN EVALUATION OF COGNITIVE CHANGES IN RESPONSE TO GLUTEN CHALLENGE IN PATIENTS WITH COELIAC DISEASE ON A STRICT GLUTEN FREE DIET.

This research project will be conducted by Dr Evan Newnham and the research team at the Department of Gastroenterology at Monash University. The project will measure the subtle neurological effects of eating gluten by those with coeliac disease such as fatigue, difficulty concentrating, poor memory and coordination. Finding an association between these subtle neurological deficits and gluten exposure will have significant implications for the quality of life in patients with coeliac disease before and after diagnosis.

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Kristine Ash / Photo by Mark Chew



Findings will be extremely useful in the educational setting and qualify the 'fuzzy' feeling many with coeliac disease report.

IS IMMUNE TOLERANCE ABNORMAL IN COELIAC DISEASE?

Associate Professor Tony Kelleher and researchers at St Vincent's Centre for Applied Immunology in Sydney and Dr Bob Anderson and his team at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, Melbourne are collaborating on an innovative project to investigate the question of immune tolerance to gluten. Although most of the population regularly consume gluten and approximately 1 in 3 people carry the essential susceptibility genes, only 1 in 100 actually develop coeliac disease. The reason for this is unknown however environmental factors are likely to be very important by influencing the balance between a destructive pro-inflammatory and a tolerant immune response to gluten. Understanding the immune tolerance to gluten is perhaps one of the most pressing questions in the field of coeliac disease immunology.

The last project is to run over two years. The CRF recognises the importance of supporting a range of research therefore it has committed to funding this project for the first year and is working to raise the funds required for the second year.

We look forward to reporting on the

progress of the successful grant recipients and I am sure you join me in congratulating the successful recipients and wishing them every success in their endeavours to making life so much better for those with coeliac disease. The donations from members of the Coeliac Societies in every state have made it possible to fund these important projects and the researchers would, I know, want me to extend a very big thank you to everyone who made this possible.

Previous supporters of the CRF will have received information on how to further support research, however for those who would like to find out more please visit the CRF website at www.coeliacresearchfund.org.au or contact me on (03) 5968 2670.

COELIAC AWARENESS WEEK

You will see from Dr Bob Anderson's article on page 23 that we now have statistical evidence that Coeliac Awareness Week 2009 had a significant impact on antibody screening tests for coeliac disease. This information is extremely important to the CRF as it justifies the time spent in developing a professional campaign and for

the first time provides proof that a collaborative, well orchestrated campaign impacts effectively on awareness and ultimately diagnosis. The evidence will also assist us as we approach stakeholders in the coeliac disease landscape for ongoing, major support.

We are already working on the key messages for Coeliac Awareness Week 2010 with a focus on childhood awareness and diagnosis. In support of Coeliac Awareness Week 2010 the CRF is delighted that Professor Markku Mäki has accepted an invitation to visit Australia from Finland. Professor Mäki is the Chair and Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Tampere and Tampere University Hospital in Finland and is a world opinion leader in coeliac disease. His research was inspired by the needs of those with coeliac disease and the outcome has been the correct use of serologic biomarker tests leading to a 20-fold increase in diagnosed coeliac disease in adults in Finland. The President of Finland has granted him the honour of Knight, First Class, of the Order of the White Rose of Finland in 2006. Needless to say, we are very much looking forward to his visit and to

his presentations in Perth, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

We look forward to working with The Coeliac Society to build on the success of the 2009 campaign to make Coeliac Awareness Week 2010 a week that puts coeliac disease well and truly on the map!

I have personally enjoyed meeting many of you at the recent expos in NSW, QLD and VIC. Despite the crush and throng, it was interesting to speak with you and to hear your incredible journey to coeliac disease diagnosis. The conversations have given me a deeper appreciation of the way in which you manage the gluten free diet on a daily basis. The experience has made me more determined that the CRF will grow to be an organisation which breaks down barriers and works across all sectors, nationally and internationally, to bring about change.

Thank you for your ongoing support of our work. I would like to take this opportunity to wish you and your loved ones all a very safe and happy festive season and prosperous New Year.

**Kristine Ash / Executive Officer
The Coeliac Research Fund*



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