Flinders University

VitalConnections

2025 College of Medicine and Public Health Alumni Magazine

















Flinders University is transforming health and inspiring futures in local communities and across the globe.

Contents

Flinders University acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which its campuses are located. These are the Traditional Lands of the Arrernte, Dagoman, First Nations of the South East, First Peoples of the River Murray & Mallee region, Jawoyn, Kaurna, Larrakia, Ngadjuri, Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Warumungu, Wardaman and Yolngu people. We honour their Elders past, present and emerging.

Published by the College of Medicine and Public Health, Flinders University

All enquiries please contact Alumni & Advancement: alumni@flinders.edu.au
+61 8 7421 9578

Editing/Production: Morgan Pearse

Design: tif.image Design

Cover Images: Flinders University Image Library, Brenton Edwards, YWAM PNG.

CRICOS No. 00114A

Printed in South Australia using soy-based inks on Sovereign Silk paper. Sovereign A2 Silk is proudly made FSC Certified Mix and carries the ISO 14001 Environmental Management Systems (EMS) accreditation. Manufactured with elemental chlorine free (ECF) pulps.

Innovation embedded in community

Welcome to this edition of Vital Connections, celebrating the remarkable achievements of our College of Medicine and Public Health community.

This year marks an extraordinary milestone in research excellence, with Flinders awarded a record $15.6 million in NHMRC Investigator Grants. Featured research leaders Associate Professor Kalinda Griffiths and Professor Claire Roberts who are, respectively, advancing critical understandings in how the governance, quality and usability of data is key to improving Indigenous health outcomes (p.5), and how pregnancy research can shape the future health of women and children (p.6).

Our commitment to improving health and wellbeing for all continues to grow. With the historic launch of South Australia's first full rural medical degree (p.12) and continued success of the Northern Territory Medical Program (p.4), our award-winning staff (p.14) are training doctors in and for rural, remote and Indigenous communities.

Our reach extends beyond South Australia, with international student Yunus Soni realising a dream of helping others with a career in biotechnology (p.23), and the celebration of our inaugural Singaporean counselling graduates in partnership with the Executive Counselling and Training Academy (p.17).

The strong foundation we've built together — one centred on community, equity, and innovation, would not have been possible without our extraordinary alumni. Thank you for your continued contributions to medicine, public health, education, and research.

Professor Jonathan Craig

MBChB, DipCH, FRACP, M Med (Clin Epi), PhD, FAHMS
Matthew Flinders Distinguished Professor
Vice-President and Executive Dean
College of Medicine and Public Health

Safety and respect at Flinders

Flinders University is committed to providing a safe and respectful learning environment for all staff and students.

Flinders has officially endorsed the Respect Now Always (RNA) – Safety and Respect at Flinders Action Plan (the Plan). The Plan reinforces Flinders commitment to providing a safe and respectful learning and work environment for all students and staff. It outlines the key priorities for our University, to prevent and address sexual harassment, sexual assault and gender-based violence at Flinders.

New Indigenous doctors strengthen NT's medical future

By Oli Dubsky

In December 2024, 21 new graduates – including three Indigenous graduates – received their Doctor of Medicine (MD), marking a milestone in the Northern Territory Medical Program.

For more than a decade, Flinders University's Northern Territory Medical Program has been expanding as the only Australian Medical Council-accredited program offered entirely in the NT.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Colin Stirling says Flinders University has maintained an enduring presence in the Territory, as the University celebrates its 229th medical graduate.

"Our medical program delivers hands-on training tailored to the unique environments of the Territory, where our students gain experience from Darwin, to Nhulunbuy, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs, and remote homelands, working alongside Traditional Owners and community leaders to deliver meaningful healthcare," Professor Stirling says.

The four-year Flinders MD program is taught entirely in the NT in a unique collaboration between the Northern Territory Government and the Federal Government, and in partnership with Charles Darwin University.

The program prioritises NT residents, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants, with more than 60 percent of graduates remaining in the Territory beyond their two-year return of service. Graduates also make up 50 percent of General Practice Registrar trainees in the NT.

2024 graduate Dr Madison (Maddy) Ludwig's (MD '24) experience in renal nursing laid a strong foundation for making a career in medicine a natural next step in her healthcare journey. Her curiosity and drive to deepen her clinical understanding led her to Flinders University's Doctor of Medicine program through the Indigenous Entry Stream.

Maddy's placements took her across the Northern Territory, providing invaluable exposure to rural and remote healthcare. In her third year, she completed a five-month placement on Yolngu Country in Nhulunbuy. "I worked in the emergency department, maternity, and general ward at Gove Hospital, and went on outreach trips to surrounding communities," she says.

In her final year, Maddy spent three months on Arrernte Country at Alice Springs Hospital. Rotations in alcohol and other drugs, paediatrics, and orthopaedic surgery rounded out her education. "It was a perfect way to finish my degree," she reflects.

Professor Robyn Aitken, Flinders University Dean, Rural and Remote Health, says: "Our Territory-based training is transformative. It combines the resources of a major institution with the intimacy and resilience of close-knit communities, to deliver a healthcare workforce tailored to the NT's unique needs."

Dr Maddy Ludwig celebrates at the 2024 December graduation ceremony

Better data will improve Indigenous health outcomes

By David Sly

A gap exists in accurate records of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health data – especially with under-reported births and deaths – so improvements in Indigenous health provision depend on finding a solution for better data collection and management across many crucial areas.

Associate Professor Kalinda Griffiths has received more than $1.6 million in NHMRC funding for her project Strengthening Transparent Reporting and Improving Visibility and Equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health – which will be a key facilitator to improve data quality, data governance, workforce development and Indigenous health measurement.

"We have an under-reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health data in official statistics, particularly in rural and remote areas, and this feeds into important figures such as life expectancy," she says.

She points to alarming under-registration of birth records, with an estimated 17 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders not having their births registered. This figure rises to between 25 percent and almost 30 percent in remote areas of Queensland and Western Australia, respectively.

"That's one in four babies who aren't on any official records – and the implications are serious. They don't figure in any census, which shows the true size of communities, or their needs, or requirements for health resources, or even the fair distribution of GST allocations from governments," says Associate Professor Griffiths.

> **"These numbers matter, because they feed into vital future projections. The role of accurate data is so important. It tells us who needs what, and where."**

The five-year NHMRC project begins in 2026 and will contain several projects with a specific focus of attention, including cancer data, and births and deaths registration.

This program aims to address health inequities by improving the quality, usability and governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health data in Australia.

Associate Professor Kalinda Griffiths
Image supplied

"The COVID pandemic showed us the importance of good data, because it enabled us to access those people who required support and health services."

Associate Professor Griffiths says it is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are leading this research, as it will empower Indigenous communities to control their data and train researchers to support culturally responsive practices.

"Ultimately, this will enhance the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," she says. "It's an important time for this to happen. In a tense global era, we are seeing that the trust between governments and communities is tenuous in many countries, so it's important that we have beneficial systems to build that trust.

"This research provides an important platform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to determine processes regarding their data and information, to support needs across policy and health systems. It will enable mechanisms of Indigenous governance and work to build trusted environments for Indigenous data."

Uncovering the link between pregnancy and women's and children's future health

By David Sly

Pregnancy complications occur in more than 90,000 of the 300,000 Australian births each year, and these problems also signal future health issues for mothers and their children.

Professor Claire Roberts (BA '85), an internationally recognised authority in placenta research and leader of the Pregnancy Health and Beyond Laboratory at Flinders University, is working to identify genetic and modifiable risk factors that link pregnancy complications with future chronic diseases. She is determined to find ways to alleviate future risk.

The new five-year research project that she leads – Pregnancy: Window to Health Futures – has received more than $3 million through an NHMRC Investigator Grant. It will build on her discoveries to date in this field. She will develop new understanding about family health across generations, which will reinforce the importance of investing in maternal health.

“Health during pregnancy foreshadows a woman’s future health – and also that of her children,” says Professor Roberts.

“Our research into pregnancy health provides an opportunity to identify women who are at risk – often before they have even realised they have a problem with things such as high blood glucose or high blood pressure. It will empower women and clinicians with information and tools to act early to prevent future chronic disease.”

This research will study maternal and child health from conception, focusing on genetic, epigenetic and modifiable risk factors common to pregnancy complications, and later cardiometabolic diseases. This will generate new knowledge on how health and chronic disease is transmitted in families across generations.

Professor Claire Roberts
Photo: Brenton Edwards

The new NHMRC Investigator grant will enable Professor Roberts to steer several interlinked projects with pregnant women. The first is a study involving more than 1000 women, conducted in partnership with Southern Adelaide Local Health Network, which focuses on impacts of different levels of folic acid consumption, in the diet and in supplements, on pregnancy complications.

"Young women are taking all sorts of supplements during their pregnancy. We have found that taking too much folic acid via supplements and in fortified foods such as bread and breakfast cereals can lead to gestational diabetes and other problems for some women. Of course, too little folate also causes problems."

The second project involves an expansion of clinics for women who have had pregnancy complications, currently offered at the Lyell McEwin Hospital in Elizabeth Vale. With additional funding, these will be introduced to Flinders Medical Centre and Noarlunga Hospital. Women are assessed for metabolic syndrome, which is an important predictor of heart disease and diabetes, and twice given counselling by a nurse practitioner skilled in cardio-metabolic health in young women – at 6 and 12 months after their baby is born.

"By empowering mothers to take control of their own health, the health of their children and partners will also improve. The prevention is better than cure message is amplified through families, friends and engaging with communities."

A third area of attention for the NHMRC Investigator project will be to establish an intergenerational study of grandparents, parents and children, with pregnant women at the centre.

Partnering with clinicians, scientists, epidemiologists, non government organisations, local communities and families, it will create new knowledge, identify molecular targets and generate novel interventions, co-designed with consumers, to improve pregnancy and intergenerational health across the life course.

"The information will be powerful from genetics and epigenetics perspectives, but it will also provide crucial insights into how diet habits, physical activity, health and disease run in families. These will inform data simulations that can make accurate predictions about the health of future generations and point to ways to prevent disease."

This valuable resource, which will be brought together by consumers, community groups and a large and diverse team of clinical and biomedical experts, presents a huge opportunity to generate a living research platform that can support future research and health policy. Importantly, it will establish a digital platform that can be used not only to collect data, but also to regularly give information back to participating families, which they can use to take control of their own health. Additionally, new multi-specialty co-designed interventions will be trialled to benefit families and save health dollars in the future.

The professors who laid the foundations

By David Sly

The great ambition and risk taken by Flinders University to create Australia's first integrated Medical School with a new clinical hospital was brought to life by a diverse yet cohesive group of Professors, whose work shook up medical education in South Australia.

The 50th anniversary of Flinders University's medical program, celebrated in October 2024, shone a light on the unique nature of the brand-new Flinders Medical Centre being designed as a clinical hospital, research facility and medical school. It also highlighted the extraordinary efforts of the Flinders Medical School's Foundation Professors to make this ambitious multi-purpose facility a reality.

The Flinders Medical School foundation professorial clinical department heads were:

- John Chalmers AC (Medicine)
- James Watts (Surgery)*
- Warren Jones AO (Obstetrics and Gynaecology)
- Garry Kneebone (Paediatrics)*
- Ross Kalucy AM (Psychiatry)
- Anthony Radford AM (Primary Care and Community Medicine)*

Pre-Clinical professorial heads were:

- Andy Rogers (Morphology)*
- Laurie Geffen (Physiology)
- Michael Berry (Biochemistry*

Other professorial heads were:

- Michael Cousins AO (Anaesthesia and Intensive Care)*
- Richard Whitehead (Pathology)*
- Don Birkett (Pharmacology)
- Geoff Burness (Organ imaging)

The Associate Professors heading sub-departments were:

- Peter McDonald AM (Microbiology and Infectious Disease)
- Alec Morley (Haematology)
- John Bradley (Immunology)

Foundation Associate Professors were promoted to full Professorship after establishment of full curriculum

**Deceased*

Emeritus Professor Peter McDonald AM is especially proud that Flinders was involved in transporting its curriculum and clinical advice to assist development of the 3rd Malaysian Medical School, and that Flinders' clinical research in surgery, cardiovascular disease and healthcare systems was applied nationally and internationally to improve health outcomes.

"Foundation Professors also taught nurses in the Sturt College diploma course before nursing became a graduate degree, and Sturt implemented an independent curriculum," he remembers. "Many Foundation Professors were also responsible for post-graduate Fellowship programs with Colleges of Physicians, Pathology, Radiology and others."

Emeritus Professor Warren Jones AO, who was the Foundation Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, remembers that the initial group of Flinders Medical department heads – many who had come to Adelaide from interstate – assembled in makeshift offices within the Flinders Medical Centre, which was still under construction.

He remembers countless meetings that spelled out the great responsibility they faced, to turn the empty shell of a building into a fully functioning clinical hospital, as well as a teaching and research facility that would transform medical education in South Australia.

"We all had experience from working in other medical schools, but starting a new operation from scratch was tricky," says Professor Jones. "Still, we were all highly energised. South Australia was lagging behind the Eastern States in medical training, and we were in a position to change that. We were presented with an incredible opportunity, to rethink new things that should be taught in medical education."

Professor Jones says everything fell neatly into place, mainly because of the latitude for the Foundation Professors of the new Flinders Medical Program to do things differently.

"It proved to be a brilliant experiment," says Professor Jones. "The program was supported by idyllic funding in the first decade from Federal, State and the University, and we used those resources to propel medical education into the future."

> **"The first students who went through the Flinders Medical Program, and got to do clinical work with hospital patients so early in their studies, benefitted from this great adventure. We all worked so closely together to succeed."**

Inaugural Flinders Medical Program staff, including: Michael Cousins AO (back row, far left), John Bradley, (back row, fourth from right), Peter McDonald AM (back row, third from right), Michael Berry (middle row, third from left), Richard Whitehead (middle row, fourth from left), Warren Jones AO (middle row, fifth from left), Garry Kneebone (middle row, fifth from right), Geoff Burness (middle row, fourth from right), Alec Morley, (middle row, third from right), Laurie Geffen (front row, third from left), Gus Fraenkel AM (front row, fourth from left) James Watts (front row, third from right), Andy Rogers (front row, second from right), and John Chalmers AC (seated, far right).

Professor Jones remembers the Foundation staff of the Flinders Medical Program to be an especially cohesive group, notable for their extensive knowledge, experience and communicatory skills. "We worked with so many other experts and got so much good advice from elsewhere, which made the whole hospital work in lock-step with the Medical training that we were delivering.

"Flinders is to be applauded for employing so many tangential-thinking people at all levels, which meant Flinders was able to present many firsts through its Medical program.'

Emeritus Professor John Chalmers AC, who was awarded an honorary Degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1999, says much credit for success is owed to the Foundation Vice-Chancellor, Emeritus Professor Peter Karmel AC (deceased), and Dr Brian Shea (deceased), Head of the Hospitals Department in South Australia during the school's early years. They agreed there should be Academic Headship across the Medical School and the Medical Centre, with a single integrated building complex housing the academic disciplines and the clinical and diagnostic departments.

"Much is also owed to our founding Dean, Emeritus Professor Gus Fraenkel AM (deceased), and to the inaugural Administrator of the Medical Centre, Mr John Blandford, who initiated the emphasis of integration, with a tripod of research and teaching being integrated into patient care," says Professor Chalmers.

Many of the Flinders Medical School pioneers have now died, but the legacy of the innovative integrated course they established has provided a solid foundation on which Flinders University's reputation for exemplary medical education has thrived.

Professor Richard Edwards to lead Public Health at Flinders

By Morgan Pearse

Flinders University welcomes Professor Richard Edwards as the new Head of Public Health, bringing a deep commitment to prevention, health equity and robust policy, shaped by decades of experience in teaching, research and advocacy.

Trained in medicine and public health in the UK, Professor Edwards held academic roles at Newcastle and Manchester before nearly 20 years at the University of Otago, New Zealand. His work in tobacco control — particularly through the ASPIRE Aotearoa Research Centre — supported world-leading legislation aimed at achieving the Smokefree Aotearoa 2025 goal.

Now in South Australia, he's excited to grow Flinders' vibrant public health community. "I want to help amplify the already excellent work being done here, to promote population health and reduce health inequities" he says.

A strong advocate for evidence-based interventions, Professor Edwards is motivated by his early clinical experience as a respiratory doctor. "I saw firsthand the huge burden of preventable disease caused by smoking. That pushed me toward public health."

With a focus on impact and equity, he's ready to lead into a promising future.

Professor Richard Edwards
Photo: Brenton Edwards

Expanding expertise in epidemiology

By David Sly

The important work of epidemiologists – who investigate the cause, distribution and control of diseases that affect populations – was pulled into sharp focus during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting a need for more experts within this specialised area.

Flinders University has reacted by offering a New Master of Clinical Epidemiology qualification – a one-year course for postgraduate students, designed in consultation with health industry partners, to provide the specialised knowledge and skills required for successful clinical research.

Flinders University Head of Discipline of Biostatistics, Associate Professor Murthy Mittinity, says the new clinical epidemiology course provides an important building block for public health students to integrate research evidence with clinical expertise, and to build their abilities as researchers.

"The new course fills a gap that will strengthen epidemiology knowledge, and this will empower the next generation to continue performing innovative research that can be applied in clinical settings and make a positive difference," says Associate Professor Mittinity.

In addition to standard topics on Biostatistics, Health Economics and Machine Learning, the course covers two new topics that focus on the creation and analysis of effective research – An Introduction to Clinical Epidemiology, and An Introduction to Clinical Trials.

These subjects will teach medical graduates how to conduct and design clinical trials, frame appropriate research questions, and interpret evidence that can improve clinical outcomes for patients.

"The course will also conduct workshops that provide students with access to real-world data, so they can examine current health issues accurately, but also learn how to best apply solutions so that positive health outcomes will occur."

New jobs are also emerging in public health for Clinical Informatics, requiring research analysts to best understand health data and apply it with deft skill. This makes the new Master of Clinical Epidemiology qualification especially valuable for providing an important stepping stone in future public health specialisations.

Associate Professor Murthy Mittinity
Photo: Brenton Edwards

Dr Scott Milan working with Papua New Guinea (PNG) Outreach Group YWAM - Youth With A Mission
Photo: YWAM PNG

Dr Scott Milan - from rural roots to worldwide reach

By Morgan Pearse

For Dr Scott Milan (BMBS(Hons) '05), rural medicine is more than a career — it's a calling. After beginning his professional life as a medical laboratory scientist in a small country town, Dr Milan witnessed firsthand the critical role that doctors play in rural communities. That spark inspired him to pursue medicine at Flinders University, where he joined one of the earliest rural clinical training programs.

"Flinders was doing something unique — placing students directly into regional settings for meaningful, hands-on learning," says Dr Milan. "It laid the foundation for everything I do today."

Now based in Mount Gambier as a GP and owner of Hawkins Medical Clinic, Dr Milan has spent almost two decades strengthening rural health services. His career has included more than 120,000 patient consultations, the mentorship of over 70 trainees, and leadership roles in clinical education.

"Rural people are loyal, welcoming and deeply appreciative," he says. "It's an honour to care for the community in which you live and grow."

As a Clinical Supervisor and Clinical Tutor in the South Australia Rural Medical (SARM) program, Dr Milan is helping shape the future of rural medicine right from his hometown.

"The fact students can now stay local for their entire medical education is revolutionary," he says. "It's a game changer for building and retaining a skilled rural workforce."

Dr Milan's zeal lies in teaching, particularly in regional contexts. "I'm passionate about passing on the knowledge gained from decades of rural practice. Rural medicine is demanding, yes, but it allows doctors to use the full scope of their training."

His dedication extends beyond borders. When not in Mount Gambier, Dr Milan and his wife volunteer as ship-based doctors in remote Papua New Guinea, delivering essential medical care where it's needed most. One day, he hopes to take Flinders students with him to experience tropical medicine and learn to rely on clinical judgment in low-resource settings.

As he gradually transitions from full-time consulting to a focus on mentoring and service, Dr Milan remains deeply committed to nurturing the next generation of doctors.

"Rural medicine is incredibly rewarding — you get to know your patients as people, not just cases," he reflects. "And the skills Flinders gave me — critical thinking, collaboration, adaptability — are exactly what rural doctors need most."

New degree boosts future medical workforce

By David Sly

An urgent need to increase the number of doctors in Australia's rural and remote areas is being addressed by Flinders University, which has launched South Australia's first full rural medical degree.

The new four-year South Australia Rural Medical (SARM) program is enabling aspiring doctors to complete their entire medical degree in regional communities.

Sixty students have commenced their studies in this landmark program, with 30 in Mount Gambier and another 30 in Renmark.

These students will spend their first two years in either Mount Gambier or Renmark, before completing their clinical training across Flinders' extensive rural network, including the Barossa, Riverland, Hills Mallee Fleurieu, and Greater Green Triangle.

Flinders University's Associate Professor James Padley, Program Lead for the new medical degree, says this original approach represents a huge step forward by training medical students in regional areas, to ensure they remain in those areas as qualified physicians.

"It has been a long time coming, and this is such an important investment for the future of regional Australia," says Associate Professor Padley. "Growing the rural medical workforce has to start with attracting more rural students to pursue medical degrees.

The development of this important new course has been made possible by the Federal Government allocating 20 Commonwealth Supported Places and $19.7 million in funding from 2023-24, with a co-contribution from Flinders University to support another 40 students in the program.

This marks a new high-point in Flinders University's 25-year commitment to community-based rural medical education, which started with Emeritus Professor Paul Worley (PhD(Med) '03), who pioneered rural clinical school training that took medical students to rural areas for the third year of their four-year degree.

Associate Professor Padley has seen these rural initiatives develop further through the Riverland Academy of Clinical Excellence (RACE) program, which has attracted first-year interns to the Riverland and retained them for their entire post-graduate training, to work within the local health network.

"This has added 40 doctors to rural communities, which has knock-on benefits because kids in rural schools can now see there are medical jobs that can keep them in their rural communities. Previously, if you wanted to be a rural doctor, you'd study and do initial training in the city, and move around to several locations before you finally got out to the country and started your GP training – and this was too piecemeal," he says. "The new qualification is providing end-to-end training in rural locations that will grow the rural workforce, and that's a significant win for the regions.

"The new program has also attracted seven new academics to Mount Gambier and the Riverland, to teach the fundamentals of medicine – including anatomy, biochemistry and genetics – and this will minimise screentime learning for medical students, because we know that face-to-face learning is so important.

> **“We know that students who train in the regions are more likely to stay and practice there, and this program will help to build a sustainable rural health workforce for South Australia.”**

Associate Professor James Padley with students from the Flinders South Australian Rural Medical Program
Photo: Supplied

“We also have Flinders experts at Bedford Park and in Darwin who are plugged into this program, so we have an expanded brains trust connecting the four city and rural locations, and we have the four different student learning groups all working together. It’s a huge achievement to have this in place for the first year of this new course.

“Having this increased medical knowledge and experience in rural areas is a benefit that will have knock-on effects for decades – and inspire the next generation.”

Flinders University Vice-Chancellor Professor Colin Stirling says the South Australia Rural Medical Program is a game-changer for rural health in South Australia.

“Flinders has been training doctors ready to meet the needs of South Australians for over 50 years and delivering health to Territorians for more than 25 years, including the Northern Territory Medical Program since 2011. This new initiative takes our commitment to the development of the medical workforce to the next level,” says Professor Stirling.

First-year rural medical student Nick Carrodus relocated to Mount Gambier from Victoria so he could study in the new program, and says the opportunity has transformed what once seemed like an impossible dream.

“I always wanted to become a doctor, but it felt like a pipedream,” says Nick. “Now, I’m here with my family, studying medicine in Mount Gambier. I’m so grateful to be part of this journey and hope to give back to this community that has already given so much to me.”

Awards show the rewards of advanced teaching skills

By David Sly

A recent flurry of awards for teaching within the College of Medicine and Public Health (CMPH) has shone a bright light onto the high quality of student learning experiences enjoyed at Flinders University.

"These awards are recognition of the good work that has been embedded within our teaching programs that run broadly across the College," says Professor Karen Lower (BSc '97, BSc(Hons) '98, GradCertEd(HighEd) '13), CMPH, Dean of Education.

> **"No educator in this college is an island, so awards such as these are a dynamic showcase of the high quality that stretches across CMPH teaching programs. It demonstrates that our teaching team has a constant focus on student excellence and delivering a quality student experience."**

Professor Lower says looking at ways that medical educators can heighten the student experience is extremely important. "Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a dramatic speed of change in the way we deliver education – and we have very quickly seen this as an opportunity to deliver higher education differently, in a fresh way that opens us to new methods of engaging with students and increasing inclusivity."

This is reflected in the success that Flinders has enjoyed across its teaching staff, particularly through highlighting the achievements of eight recent education award winners.

Associate Professor Voula Gaganis (PhD(Med) '05, MEd(HighEd) '23) - winner of a 2024 Universities Australia Award for Teaching Excellence in Health and 2024 STEMM Educator of the Year – has led the development and national accreditation of Flinders' new medical science laboratory medicine degree, which features advanced digital learning technologies.

"The advent of teaching specialist roles, such as the position that Associate Professor Gaganis holds, has been a game changer for higher education, and reflects the fact that teaching has the same level of importance as research in the University priorities," says Professor Lower.

Teaching excellence is also recognised within teams working

L-R: Professor Helen Anscomb, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students) Professor Romy Lawson, Dr Dusan Matusica and Associate Professor Christine Barry at the SA & NT Promotion of Excellence Network awards ceremony.

together to provide improved outcomes. The team of Dr Dusan Matusica (BSc(Hons) '03, PhD(Med) '08), Associate Professor Christine Barry (GradCertHigherEd '23), and Professor Helen Anscomb, received a 2024 Vice-Chancellor's Award Commendation for Excellence in Teaching and a 2024 Universities Australia Citation for their work in providing new assessment strategies in a human anatomy dissection program for medical students.

Outside of the cities, Leigh Moore and Melba Ridd (GradCertClinEd '20, GradDipClinEd '22, MClinEd(Cwk) '24), who are both part of Flinders' Rural and Remote Health program, received 2024 CMPH Vice-President Executive Dean Teaching Awards for their work in creating a fresh educational innovation to support educators delivering remote health subjects.

Dr Lara Escane (BMedSc '13, BSc(Hons) '14, PhD(Med) '21), who received a 2024 CMPH Outstanding Student-Centred Teaching and Learning Award, is at the start of her teaching career, and is thriving as a placement education co-ordinator for laboratory medicine students, who undertake two semester-long placements in clinical laboratories during their fourth year of study. Her busy workload also includes being Year 1 Coordinator of the Medical Science programs, and she is part of the Human Molecular Genetics teaching team.

Associate Professor George (Savio) Barreto (PhD(Med) '10) – a liver transplant surgeon, Deputy Director of the MD course at Bedford Park, and also coordinator of MD Advanced Studies stream – also received a 2024 CMPH Outstanding Student-Centred Teaching and Learning Award, recognising his tireless devotion to teaching and supporting medical students.

"Associate Professor Barreto already has such a busy schedule as a surgeon, so his commitment to teaching the next generation of clinicians is extraordinary," says Professor Lower. "This is the level of commitment that our teachers provide.

"These achievements are all important recognition that Flinders can reach and support everyone who wants an education in medicine and public health – whether that be a single mother wanting to learn to be doctor, a full-time clinician striving to become a skilled clinical educator, or someone living in rural South Australia who dreams of being a paramedic – we can deliver the teaching so they can achieve their goal."

Professor Romy Lawson with Associate Professor Voula Gaganis (right) at the SA & NT Promotion of Excellence Network awards ceremony

From struggle to strength

Matthew Flinders Scholarship

By Lynda Allen

Helen is not your average medical student. A single mother of three and a cancer survivor, she has reached the fourth year of the Doctor of Medicine degree at Flinders University thanks to her extraordinary courage and scholarship support.

"It's a demanding degree, which I've had to fit in alongside casual work as a pharmacist to support my three young children," says Helen. "But I'm determined to become a doctor."

Helen has always wanted to work in a health-related profession that helped people. After studying pharmacy in Melbourne, she relocated to Adelaide in 2020 and started her medical degree at Flinders two years later, inspired by the doctors she had worked alongside.

But her road to becoming a doctor hasn't been easy.

"Raising three young children on my own, studying and working has been a real juggle, and the rising costs of housing, food, utilities and petrol have made the journey even more difficult," says Helen.

> **"If things had been this expensive back in 2022, I know my budget would not have stretched enough to even begin a medical degree."**

Then in her third year of study, the unthinkable happened – Helen was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"Last year I discovered a lump and was diagnosed. I have since undergone 20 weeks of chemo, had a double mastectomy and am currently completing my radiation therapy."

With time off work for treatment, financial pressure and stress mounted, but she credits the donor-funded Matthew Flinders Scholarship and Dr Lesley Shorne Memorial Scholarship with helping her stay on track with her studies.

"I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and my career as a doctor is within sight," says Helen.
Photo: Brenton Edwards

"The scholarships have taken a great deal of pressure off me," says Helen. "With the funds I was able to buy textbooks, online resources and anatomy flash cards, which were all vital in helping me pass my end-of-year exams."

"With these costs covered, I have been able to work less and spend more time with my family and on my studies, not to mention the recovery time needed from my cancer treatment."

Helen is now enjoying the challenge of a full-time placement in Oncology at St Andrew's Medical Centre.

Thanks to donor support, she is looking forward to becoming a doctor and one day working in General Practice, Rural Health, Women's Health and Oncology.

> **"Without donor help, I would be putting my degree on the back burner, but now I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and my career as a doctor is within sight."**

You can provide vital support for students like Helen to continue their studies and reach graduation by giving to the Matthew Flinders Scholarship for students in financial need.

Support students in financial need

100% of your tax-deductible donation will support students in financial need through the Matthew Flinders Scholarship.

Donate today Flinders.edu.au/donate

Inaugural Singapore graduates

By Sally Lauder

More than 300 Singaporean and international graduates of diverse backgrounds and abilities celebrated their postgraduate qualifications in counselling education in November 2024.

These graduates are the inaugural cohort of professional-level counselling courses awarded by Flinders University and organised by the Executive Counselling and Training Academy (ECTA), Singapore's leading private educational institution (PEI) in counselling.

Embracing diversity and inclusivity, the Flinders and ECTA counselling courses are designed to accommodate students with a range of physical, visual, and neurodivergent needs.

By recognising and supporting the unique strengths and requirements of each learner, ECTA fosters an empowering space where future counsellors can grow and develop.

Valedictorian at the graduation ceremony, HOW Shi Min (MCouns '24) says the program was practical and transformational.

"The course provided flexibility for adult learners, had a comprehensive curriculum and strong student support," says Shi Min.

"The diversity of my classmates with their unique backgrounds lent to very diverse views and discussions, which enriched my learning.

"The Flinders/ECTA Masters program provided good practicum support throughout, which helped to ground our theoretical knowledge in practical ways and give confidence in working with clients

"My time at Flinders/ECTA was nothing short of life-changing, both professionally and personally," she says.

Rooted in the humanistic values of acceptance, unconditional positive regard, empathy, and sincerity, the way the courses were taught created a nurturing space reflecting the qualities essential for effective counselling.

This focus on diversity and inclusivity also enriches the learning experience by bringing together learners diverse in age, ranging from 25 to 71 years old.

The dynamic environment fosters compassion, resilience and mutual respect, encouraging learners to reassess assumptions and broaden their perspectives.

Graduate Ephraim Lin (GradCertCouns '23, GradDipCouns '24) says that the course provided much more than just a qualification.

"Originally, I had expected to learn more about others with my Masters, but through this course, I have now come to appreciate that understanding others starts first with understanding myself," says Ephraim.

"The two years of learning and training has allowed me to reach a level of self-awareness to help me navigate differences, build trust and work more effectively with all my colleagues and stakeholders."

The success of this inaugural cohort marks a meaningful step forward in producing empathetic and insightful counsellors who are equipped to support individuals, families, and communities facing the complexities of modern society.

Graduate Ephraim Lin with College of Medicine and Public Health Vice-President Executive Dean Professor Jonathan Craig and Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students) Professor Romy Lawson at the graduation ceremony.

Valedictorian HOW Shi Min with Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students) Professor Romy Lawson at the graduation ceremony.

Congratulations to our 2024 Alumni Award Recipients

The achievements of 11 outstanding Flinders University graduates, across a range of career paths, industries and community involvement, were acknowledged at the 2024 Flinders University Alumni Awards. The Flinders University Alumni Awards acknowledge the significant contributions made by our graduates to the community, the University or within their chosen field, locally, nationally and internationally. The College of Medicine and Public Health was thrilled to have four of its alumni recognised in this impressive group.

Convocation Medal

Dr Brendan Nelson
(BM, BS '83, DUniversity '11)

Scan to watch Dr Nelson's acceptance speech.

Awarded for outstanding leadership and impact in the public and private sectors

Throughout his remarkable career, Dr Nelson has made decisions that have shaped Australia's future. He has chosen the vessels that safeguard Australian waters, shaped policies that changed the nation's trajectory, and represented Australia on the international stage as the country's ambassador to NATO.

The first in his family to attend university, Dr Nelson grew up in modest circumstances. His parents, who had struggled to make ends meet, pinned their hopes for a brighter future on their son's education.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do," Dr Nelson recalls. "But I did a lot of thinking about it and came to the conclusion that people who end their lives with the greatest sense of satisfaction are people who spend their lives in the service of others. So I applied for medicine at Flinders University, and it changed my life."

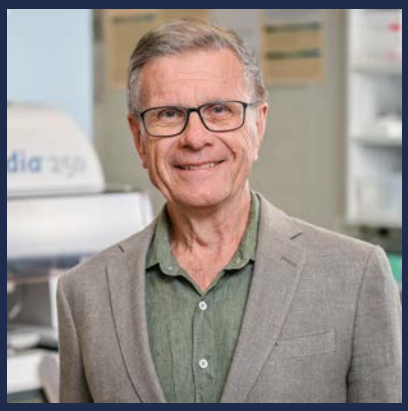
After graduating, Dr Nelson moved to Hobart in 1984 to work at the Royal Hobart Hospital. Rising through the ranks of the Australian Medical Association, in 1995 he received its highest honour, the Gold Medal for Distinguished Service to Medicine and Humanity.

From 1996 to 2009, Dr Nelson served as a member of the Australian Parliament, including five years as Minister for Education, Science and Training, followed by two years as Minister for Defence.

Following his parliamentary career, Dr Nelson became Director of the Australian War Memorial, where he oversaw transformative reforms and secured a $550 million redevelopment. In 2019, he transitioned to the private sector, joining Boeing Australia.

Now based in London, he was appointed President of Boeing Global in late 2022. Today, Dr Nelson oversees Boeing's global operations outside the United States, leading 30,000 employees across 50 countries and generating $25 billion in annual revenue.

Distinguished Alumni Award



Professor Tom Gordon
(PhD(Med) '87, DM '96)

Awarded for distinguished leadership, innovation, and research in the field of human autoimmunity

Professor Tom Gordon, Head of Immunology at Flinders Medical Centre, and his team have made an outstanding contribution to the advancement of immunological knowledge for humanity through their willingness to go against the grain and research bravely.

Although being a difficult time for society as a whole, the COVID-19 pandemic brought many professions into the spotlight, including Professor Gordon's research.

Professor Gordon and his team made a significant contribution through their work measuring blood antibody responses against the virus at a molecular level, and cracking the code of a lethal antibody that caused VITT – vaccine induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia.

This fundamental genetic observation theoretically may lead to a better understanding of genetic risk factors underlying many autoimmune disorders and possibly cancerous disease.

Professor Gordon has made many other substantial contributions in his field, including the serological characterisation of Sjogren's Syndrome, the concept of 'epitope spreading', the discovery of functional autoantibodies in narcolepsy, and the development of Quality Assurance Programs in the routine diagnostic immunology laboratory.

Photo: Brenton Edwards

Early Career Alumni Award

Sara Carrison
(BMedSc(VisSc),MOpt '19)

Awarded for significant contribution to First Nations' eye health and advocating for a culturally safe and inclusive environment within the profession

Sara Carrison is an emerging leader in the optometry field, championing First Nations eye students and advocating for creating a culturally safe and inclusive environment within the profession.

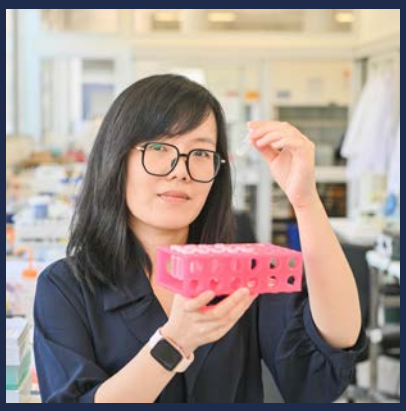
As a proud Ngarrindjeri woman and optometrist hailing from the rural town of Port Lincoln, Sara always had a keen interest through high school to study optometry, but faced a daunting move interstate until Flinders launched the Medical Science (Vision Science) degree.

Sara serves on the Policy and Education Committee of the Optometry Board of Australia and her unwavering commitment to enhancing eye health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities was recently recognised at the 2024 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health Conference (NATSIEHC24), where she received the Emerging Leader in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health award.

In her spare time, Sara also mentors students currently studying optometry, even travelling to support Darwin-based students.

Photo: Brenton Edwards

Read the inspiring stories of our awardees: Flinders.edu.au/alumni-awards



Dr Xuan Luo
(DipCommInfTech '08, BHumNut '12, MBiotechSt '14, PhD(Med) '19)

Awarded for significant contributions to the fields of biotechnology and nanotechnology and as an advocate for sustainable manufacturing in the healthcare sector

Imagine a system for reading human disease biomarkers that can vastly reduce medical plastic waste – and can achieve results for medical teams in faster time, from days to only minutes. This milestone has been realised by Dr Xuan Luo, a dynamic and creative researcher at Flinders University's Institute for Nanoscale Science and Technology.

Dr Luo pursued this research path after considering the greatest problems requiring green science solutions, and high on the list she identified unnecessary plastic medical waste.

Dr Luo and the team successfully developed a prototype capable of replacing the traditional plastic assay plates used in testing.

The results exceeded her expectations, with the most significant achievements being the detection of biomarkers for motor neurone disease, and a dramatic reduction in assay time, from three days to just five minutes.

Dr Luo is currently refining the platform to enhance its sensitivity and specificity in detecting multiple biomarkers simultaneously. Her goal is to demonstrate the potential of this cost-effective, time-efficient and environmentally-friendly system for broader applications in human disease biomarker testing.

Photo: Brenton Edwards

Leading global cancer research

Rex Elliot Wegener PhD Scholarship

A new biospecimen database at Flinders University is at the forefront of global mesothelioma cancer research, thanks to an ongoing scholarship created in honour of Rex Wegener.

Tragically, Australia has one of the highest rates of mesothelioma in the world – an aggressive lung cancer that currently has no cure.

Most of these cases are linked to the exposure of asbestos fibres, a persistent threat in Australia where nearly five million homes contain asbestos building materials.

Rex Wegener, a retired builder, former gymnast and state champion rower, thought he was in excellent health when he was diagnosed with mesothelioma.

His wife, Catherine, recalls the shock and disbelief they experienced upon learning that the cancer was linked to his work-related exposure to asbestos, and that knowledge about the disease was so limited.

"Rex was an extremely healthy man who regularly played tennis and golf. He never needed to go to the doctor, he never got sick or had headaches, then all of sudden we found out he had cancer - we didn't even know what mesothelioma meant," says Catherine.

> **"It started with him struggling to breathe, marking the beginning of an awful journey. I naively thought that if I knew more about it, I could help to make Rex better. I was so wrong; the disease was in charge."**

Sadly, Rex passed away in 2017 at the age of 75, just two years after his cancer diagnosis.

In loving memory of her husband, Catherine created the Rex Elliot Wegener PhD Scholarship at Flinders University in 2020, to advance mesothelioma research and improve outcomes for future sufferers.

Through Catherine's generous annual donation, so far totalling $250,000, the research scholarship has supported PhD student Sarita Prabhakaran to develop a much-needed database to collect and analyse mesothelioma cases from around the world.

Working under the guidance of Professor Sonja Klebe (PhD(Med) '01) at Flinders University, Sarita has established the Asbestos-related diseases and Mesothelioma Biology Research (AMBR) database. The cutting-edge database integrates clinical data and biospecimens from individuals affected by asbestos-related disease.

Sarita explains, "To improve mesothelioma diagnosis, advance our understanding of disease mechanisms and predict treatment options and responses, it's essential to link larger sets of clinical data and diagnostic information with specimens such as pleural fluid, tissue and blood.

> **"The AMBR database is now at the forefront of global mesothelioma research, supporting researchers worldwide in their quest to improve treatments and care, and ultimately finding a cure."**

The support of the Rex Elliot Wegener PhD Scholarship has also enabled Sarita to assess the variances in grading of mesothelioma by pathologists across the world.

"The investigation showed that the current grading system for mesothelioma remained robust, but critical tissue and cell features such as nuclear atypia, mitotic counts and necrosis needed more standardised training to improve diagnostic consistency," says Sarita.

In 2023 Sarita presented further research findings at the World Conference on Lung Cancer in Singapore, along with papers published in the *Pathology Journal* and *Journal of Pathology, Microbiology and Immunology.*

Catherine Wegener and Sarita Prabhakaran
Photo: Brenton Edwards

> **"The support from the Rex Elliot Wegener PhD Scholarship has not only progressed my mesothelioma research and established the valuable AMBR database, but has also extended my networks critical to my work," says Sarita.**

Sarita now works closely with the Asbestos Victims Association of South Australia, which provides support services for mesothelioma patients and their families and raises awareness about the disease.

She also collaborates with the Australian Mesothelioma Registry to analyse the incidence of multiple primary cancers in mesothelioma patients across the country.

Catherine is pleased by the progress made possible through her scholarship support, and its meaningful tribute to her late husband and others who have suffered from asbestos-related cancer.

"Rex was a happy man who had the gift of making people laugh," says Catherine who recalls Rex's early working life and introduction to asbestos.

"Rex took up an apprenticeship in carpentry and joinery at the age of 17 and was later introduced to asbestos after he moved to Melbourne from Adelaide.

"It was a very popular product and was used a lot in building and construction. In those days it was all hand-sawing, no mask. He had no knowledge of the dangers. It was years later that information filtered through, but the damage had already been done."

Catherine hopes the scholarship in memory of Rex will help raise awareness about mesothelioma and ultimately lead to breakthroughs in treatment and care.

> **"Research is the only way to find answers to this disease – it has already improved treatments that were not available to Rex."**

"While it's too late for Rex, it's not too late for other sufferers. I believe that one day there will be a breakthrough," says Catherine.

New head to guide next stage of Paramedicine at Flinders

By Morgan Pearse

Flinders University welcomes Associate Professor Andrew Makkink as the new Head of Paramedicine, bringing a wealth of experience, insight and vision to one of Australia's fastest-evolving healthcare disciplines.

Associate Professor Makkink's path into paramedicine was anything but conventional. After nearly a decade in the mining industry as a qualified mine surveyor, he made the bold decision to leave it behind and pursue his passion for healthcare. "Despite having exhausted my financial resources during my studies, it was an amazing decision — one that I remain convinced was the right one," he reflects.

Now, as he steps into his role at Flinders, Associate Professor Makkink is excited to shape the future of the Paramedicine Program. "Paramedicine is a young and evolving profession," he says. "That brings great opportunity — not just to respond to today's patient needs, but to expand our reach and impact as a profession."

He envisions expanding the Flinders program through increased research, postgraduate training, and greater interprofessional collaboration, all while maintaining strong community engagement.

For Associate Professor Makkink, joining Flinders was the right move at the right time. "Flinders offered an opportunity for growth at a world-class university in a beautiful city," he says. "The supportive environment and forward-looking ethos here really resonates with me."

Simulation and hands-on training will remain key pillars of the curriculum under Associate Professor Makkink's leadership. "As a simulationist at heart, I believe simulation must be deliberate and carefully mapped to learning outcomes," he explains. "It's essential for preparing students for the realities of patient care."

But it's not all academic. Associate Professor Makkink is deeply invested in supporting students, not only as future clinicians, but also by acknowledging the emotional realities of the profession. "It's not just about skills and knowledge," he says. "It's about helping students build resilience, manage stress, and care for themselves — because they can't care for others if they're running on empty."

Associate Professor Andrew Makkink in one of the paramedicine training areas at Flinders University Sturt Campus
Photo: Brenton Edwards

He sees Flinders as a university deeply connected to its community — one where ambitious ideas can grow and make a real difference.

> **"I'm excited to be part of an institution that's committed to improving healthcare through education, research and collaboration."**

In his downtime, Associate Professor Makkink enjoys running through Adelaide's parklands, tending to his garden, and spending time with his family and their pets. "Settling in here has been easy — it's a city that welcomes you, and a university that makes you want to get involved. I've felt supported from day one."

From childhood dream to impressive biotech impact

By Morgan Pearse

For Al Mohammad Yunus (Yunus) Soni (MBiotech, '23), the dream of becoming a scientist began in childhood long before he could distinguish one field of science from another. "The allure of discovery and innovation captivated me," he says. "But it wasn't until Year 11 that I discovered biotechnology and that's when everything clicked."

Today, Yunus works as a Senior Formulation Technician at Thermo Fisher Scientific, producing monoclonal antibodies that help patients worldwide fight life-threatening diseases.

"Every antibody we help produce is part of a patient's hope," he says.

Originally from India, Yunus was drawn to Flinders University's Master of Biotechnology program because of its distinctive integration of industrial, pharmaceutical and medical biotechnology. But it was the program's emphasis on real-world experience that truly set it apart for him.

"The opportunity to undertake a nine-month research project with industry partners was particularly appealing."

He credits much of his success to the mentorship of his research supervisor, Dr Liu-Fei Tan.

"She motivated me during moments I was ready to give up. Her guidance made all the difference."

During his time at Flinders, Yunus also served as an International Student Ambassador — his first experience in a professional environment. In this role, he supported fellow international students while developing vital communication and leadership skills.

> **"These experiences not only gave me confidence and enriched my interpersonal skills, but also expanded my professional network, laying a strong foundation for my future career."**

Yunus Soni
Image supplied

He also praises the support of the International Student Services team.

"The support from them was incredible. I never felt alone," he says. "Flinders offered not just education, but belonging."

Now contributing to the production of monoclonal antibodies that support patients globally, Yunus remains inspired by the potential of biotechnology.

"What excites me most about biotechnology is the opportunity to be at the forefront of scientific innovation that directly impacts human health and wellbeing," he says. "Ultimately, my passion stems from its potential to make a meaningful difference in the world."

Looking ahead, Yunus is focused on growth.

"My long-term ambition is to transition into a senior leadership role. I aim to lead teams in developing innovative biotechnological processes that address critical healthcare challenges."

Reflecting on his journey, he says choosing Flinders was one of the best decisions of his life.

"It helped turn a dream into a career."

Flinders University

Study a Postgraduate Health Degree

Up to 80% off fees due to Government subsidies.*

* Government subsidies enable Flinders to offer domestic applicants a reduction of up to 80% off full course fees through Commonwealth Supported Places. Not all courses. Offer subject to change.

With a global reputation for producing career-ready graduates, Flinders' powerful alliance of health, medicine and care is helping create a diverse and passionate team of future health leaders.

Fit your study around work commitments through our online delivery modes, full-time and part-time study options, as well as weekend intensives for some courses.

Explore a range of courses with up to 80% off fees, including the Graduate Certificate in Public Health, Master of Public Health, Master of Clinical Education, Master of Clinical Epidemiology, Graduate Diploma in Remote Health Practice or Intensive Care Paramedicine to name a few.

Learn more