

MEDIA RELEASE

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NSW researchers honoured for work that packs a real-world punch

Four NSW researchers whose work has changed the way we design and deliver healthcare have been honoured in the Sax Institute's inaugural Research Action Awards.

The researchers have made an impact on areas ranging from being pivotal in having sunbeds banned in several states to changing the way we communicate about vaccines to hesitant parents.

The Institute established the annual awards this year to recognise research that supports policy decisions that make a real-world difference to people's health and wellbeing.

"The winning applications are outstanding examples of research that is making a critical contribution to health and health systems," said Sax Institute CEO Professor Sally Redman. "Our award winners have not only undertaken research about issues of immediate relevance to those who make health decisions, they have also found elegant ways to have their findings acted upon."

A panel of national and international experts chose the four successful applicants. They are:

Dr Anne Cust, University of Sydney – sunbeds and melanoma

Dr Cust led the first Australian population-based study to establish a link between sunbed use and melanoma, and showed that young people were particularly sensitive to the effects of sunbed UV radiation. She also produced modelling estimates for the Cancer Institute NSW that showed banning sunbeds would reduce the number of melanoma cases in NSW alone by 120 per year and about 26 per year in the 18–29 year age group.

The research was pivotal to the NSW Government introducing a total ban on commercial sunbeds in late 2014. Bans have now been rolled out in other Australian states and overseas. In the US, many states have now restricted sunbed use in minors.

"I worked very closely with melanoma patient advocates after this research was published and there was already community awareness around the potential risks of sunbeds so that, in combination with the support of the Cancer Institute, really helped get this work on the agenda," Dr Cust said.

"Two successive NSW Governments were also very receptive to the idea, and even though there was a State election and opposition from the sunbed industry we were still able to see this policy change through. This is fantastic recognition for the research team who worked on the project."

Video interview: <http://youtu.be/E3GJriAttlg>

Associate Professor Julie Leask, University of Sydney – parent attitudes to vaccination

Associate Professor Leask has been researching the area of vaccine refusal and acceptance for nearly two decades and has found that strategies to improve vaccination rates should target fence-sitting parents rather than those whose opposition to vaccines is entrenched. Her work has led to an international collaboration to develop a Vaccine Communication Framework, which has been used by healthcare workers in vaccine communication in a number of countries.

This is being further developed and evaluated by the Federal Government and National Centre for Research and Surveillance in a three-year project called SARAH – Strategies and Resources to Assist Hesitant parents with vaccination. Associate Professor Leask has also been an advocate for expanding the vaccination register beyond childhood, has provided policy advice to state and federal health ministers and has presented her research to the US President's Cancer Panel, the National Vaccine Advisory Committee and the Institute of Medicine.

"Spending time advising policy makers and practitioners and talking to the media about your research is a tremendous opportunity. But it means you may spend less time on traditional measures of academic success like peer reviewed publications. This award recognises all that effort and time.

"It has been incredibly exciting to be able to see research that is often buried behind paywalls or gathering dust on library shelves shared with people who have the capacity to improve vaccination programs so they can be as effective as possible." *Video interview:* <http://youtu.be/CQ7ohxRXpCY>

Associate Professor Farah Magrabi, Macquarie University – tracking IT-related patient harm

Associate Professor Magrabi has sought to shed more light on the poorly understood area of patient safety risk posed by e-health systems. From her world-first analysis of IT safety incidents, she developed a new classification system for e-health risks. This has become the de facto international standard for analysing IT safety incidents.

She has led major pieces of work looking at IT-related safety risks in the US and England and her work is shaping policy to govern e-health safety, including recommendations from the US Institute of Medicine accepted by the US Government. Associate Professor Magrabi has also developed a new IT incident monitoring system that has been tested in general practices across Australia.

"E-health has many benefits but when IT systems are poorly designed and used they pose risks to patient safety," she said. "It is really highly significant to have our research recognised in this way as this is an issue of major significance and urgency. IT systems for pathology, medications, radiology and record-keeping play a mission-critical role in our hospitals and GP surgeries but there is not yet any active surveillance of IT-related harm currently experienced by health systems in Australia or elsewhere." *Video interview:* <http://youtu.be/qVNKL6--m3o>

Dr Santosh Khanal, NSW Ministry of Health – delivery of childhood obesity programs

Dr Khanal, from the Ministry's Office of Preventive Health, took an evidence-based approach to the policy question his organisation was facing: how to remove barriers to families attending the State Government obesity treatment program Go4Fun. A review had identified that requiring families to attend the 10-week program twice per week was a participation barrier, so Dr Khanal led a randomised controlled trial to determine the impact of restructuring the program and dropping the required attendance to once per week.

The research found the revised program could be delivered weekly without compromising health outcomes or attendance, and it led to the program frequency being changed. This resulted in substantial cost efficiencies, allowing savings to be diverted to other needed health programs.

"There were logistical challenges in rolling this large trial out across 53 program sites and 11 local health districts, but the strong evidence base meant that the policy change was accepted," Dr Khanal said. "It also means that the program is now more accessible to families, which is a good result. The question of what is the minimum attendance at paediatric obesity programs is an under-researched area and once this work is published we expect it is going to stimulate more discussion on the topic."

Video interview: <http://youtu.be/i-RMigrxfaY>

About the Sax Institute

The Institute unlocks the potential of research to have a real-world impact and connects decision makers and researchers in an effort to build better health systems. It is a non-profit, public good organisation with a membership base of 45 public health and health services research groups and their universities. The 2015 Research Action Awards were open to Sax Institute [member organisations](#) or employees of NSW Health who conduct public health or health services research.

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