



## Geoffrey Betts Fellowship winner named Postdoctoral Fellowship

The Australian Rotary Health Research Fund's inaugural Geoffrey Betts Postdoctoral Fellowship has been awarded to Dr Melanie Porter from the Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Science (MACCS) at Macquarie University in Sydney, N.S.W.

The Fellowship is a three-year \$A65,000 per annum scholarship offered to researchers who have already completed their PhD.

The scholarship is named in honour of Geoffrey Betts, AM, MBE, who was a foundation member of the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund and served on the board for 10 years, including three years as chairman and five years as vice-chairman.

Dr Melanie Porter is no stranger to the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund.

In 2003, she was awarded an Ian Scott Fellowship and in 2005, she received an Australian Rotary Health Research Fund research grant to investigate cognitive and genetic variability in people with Williams syndrome.

"I deliberately applied for a postdoctoral scholarship with the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund because Rotary has supported me so much in the past," said Dr Porter.

"I've really enjoyed the interaction and feedback that I've received from Rotarians at the meetings and conferences that I've attended.

"There are very few research grants available where you get this type of interaction."

Despite her relatively short research career (Dr Porter is 28 years of age), she already has some impressive results on the board.

Her work on Williams syndrome resulted in the universal profile for the disease being revised and her results were published in the prestigious journal of *Developmental Neuropsychology*.

She also recently presented a paper on Williams syndrome at the British Psychological Society Developmental Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland.

For the Geoffrey Betts Postdoctoral Fellowship, Dr Porter is looking at "a cognitive neuropsychological model of social processing: identification and treatment of social processing deficits."

Dr Porter explained: "Social processing can be broken down into roughly three independent functions:

(1) the ability to read emotion in

people's faces, gestures or voices;

(2) the ability to think and reason about social information and

(3) unconscious physiological reactions toward social information.

"Difficulties with social processing can be caused by physiological, perceptual or cognitive problems. Social processing deficits are very common in developmental disorders such as autism

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and schizophrenia and in acquired disorders for example, when someone has a traumatic brain injury, stroke or brain tumour."

If left untreated, social processing deficits can lead to social isolation, difficulties with education and employment, depression, anxiety and negative self-perceptions.

Yet, despite the devastating impact social processing deficits can have, they are not well understood, assessment tools for identifying them are not available and there are few appropriate treatment programs.

Hopefully this situation will soon change.

Dr Porter has recently developed the first cognitive neuropsychological model of social processing.

With her Australian Rotary Health Research Fund scholarship, Dr Porter will design and evaluate assessment tools to test the model and then once the model is proved reliable, develop treatment programs relating to specific social processes outlined in the model.

She said: "Using the model, I hope psychologists will be able to identify areas of social processing that a person is deficient in, and then design a specific treatment for that individual.

"For example, if a child has trouble reading emotions like anger in another person, using role-play situations we can teach them how to identify anger and then appropriately respond to it."

Dr Porter's project is a collaboration between MACCS at Macquarie University and the Developmental Cognitive Neuropsychology Research Unit at The Children's Hospital at Westmead in western Sydney, N.S.W.



*Geoffrey Betts, AM, MBE, was a foundation member of the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund and served on the board for 10 years, including three years as chairman.*

## RESEARCH REPORTS

The ARHRF has provided grants to many research projects over the years. Here is a small selection of mental health projects that have had a major impact on the way mental illness is studied, treated or prevented.

### **Australia's largest study into workforce mental health begins**

The largest study to ever look at the mental health of Australia's workforce has begun. After positive results from a smaller study funded by the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund (\$25,000 – 2003 grant-in-aid), a team led by Professor Harvey Whiteford from the Queensland Centre for Schizophrenia Research has secured \$2.2 million in

funding from the Federal Government to expand the project nationally.

More than 350,000 employees have been invited to participate in the study; over 61,000 responses to a mental health screening survey have already been received. A team of seven psychologists are contacting participants who are at risk of depression and encouraging them to see someone in their local area for treatment.

Preliminary results suggest that a single phone call from a psychologist is enough to encourage people with symptoms of depression to talk to a health professional.

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