

**MEDIA RELEASE**  
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## **Funding awarded for mental health research**

Research aimed at curbing suicide-rates among doctors is among three Flinders University projects to receive mental health research grant funding.

Breakthrough Mental Health Research Foundation, in partnership with Flinders University, has announced the recipients of its inaugural Grant Round.

The funding of up to \$25,000 per project will help get research projects and trials up and running and give researchers the time and resources they need to collect data to then apply for larger sums from national and international funding bodies.

Research projects include:

**Professor Paul Ward** - Assessing the structural risk and resilience factors in doctors' mental health and suicide risk.

**Professor Reg Nixon** - Trial of a new, accessible and flexible treatment program for people suffering post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Professor Sharon Lawn** - Pilot study of a motivational interviewing virtual-patient software tool for health professionals

*(see overleaf for expanded summary of each project)*

Breakthrough Mental Health Research Foundation launched earlier this year in a bid to address growing rates of mental illness, and is Australia's only dedicated mental health research foundation.

Breakthrough Executive Director John Mannion said the Foundation had formed strong links with the many emerging mental health research experts across the Flinders medical precinct.

"Most of us are familiar with the statistics that right now, one in five Australians has a mental health issue, and more people between 15-44 years are dying from suicide than any other cause... I think we all agree this is unacceptable and we need to do something to change this," John said.

"Mental illness is becoming the biggest health challenge of our lifetime and we need new research and new approaches to beat it.

"Thanks to generous support from the community, Breakthrough is today able to support these researchers in their bid to tackle mental health head on and work together with them to help create a life that's free from mental illness."

Flinders University Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) Professor Robert Saint said research is the key to improving people's wellbeing.

"Mental health issues can arise at any time, often with little warning. Anyone can be affected. And in many ways we all are; if not personally then through association with family and friends facing challenges. The causes may not be clear, and the solutions may be even more difficult to discern. That's where research can play a critical role in identifying the actions we can take to curb the impact of mental illness, and perhaps even more importantly, in the quest for prevention," Professor Saint said.

Breakthrough also today awarded Yuan (Joanne) Zhou the inaugural Lauren Corena Postgraduate Research Top-Up Scholarship to support her research into the use of imagery rescripting as a treatment adjunct for eating disorders.

This scholarship is funded by the Corena family in memory of their daughter Lauren who died of suicide at the age of 26 after years battling an eating disorder.

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**Breakthrough Mental Health Research Foundation Grant Round recipients:**

**Professor Paul Ward - *Doctors' Mental Health and Suicide Risk: Structural Risk and Resilience Factors***

Mental health issues are a growing and alarming problem, with doctors one of the groups at higher risk of poor mental health.

But Flinders University's Professor Paul Ward is working to protect and enhance doctors' mental health and reduce suicide risk thanks to a Health Seed Grant from Breakthrough Mental Health Research Foundation.

Between 2001-12, 79 doctors committed suicide in Australia.

A national survey found that doctors have a higher risk of psychological distress and suicide than other professionals and the general population, with other mental health conditions such as burnout, depression and anxiety also common.

However, seeking and accessing mental health services remains a problem for doctors, partly due to stigma, workplace culture, professional culture and concerns of confidentiality and registration.

While self-help and anonymous support are important, such approaches place ultimate responsibility for mental health on the individual doctor. Structural risk factors often remain unaddressed, despite evidence that they pose a major threat to mental health.

Prof Ward will investigate three structural influences – professional culture, organisational climate, and health service context – to identify risk and resilience factors and understand how to translate them into actionable strategies to protect and enhance doctors' mental health and reduce suicide risk.

This project is unique in going beyond acknowledging the traditional focus on what individuals can do to prevent their own poor mental health, instead emphasising the structural aspects in organisations and workplaces, as well as integrating the influence of the professional culture of being a doctor in different contexts.

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**Professor Reg Nixon - *Stepped-care for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A feasibility and open trial pilot study***

Flinders researchers will trial a more accessible and flexible treatment program for people suffering post-traumatic stress disorder.

Flinders University Professor in Psychology Reg Nixon will test a 'staged method' of treatment by initially offering psychological therapy, with the help of a therapist, online or via tele-health over a six-week period. At the end of the six-week program, clients who have not made significant gains will be offered intensive individual sessions weekly.

PTSD is a mental health condition that's triggered by either experiencing or witnessing a terrifying event.

The trial, which is funded by a Breakthrough Mental Health Research Foundation Grant, is a shake-up from traditional therapy, which typically involves weekly face-to-face therapy over 8-16 weeks.

Prof Nixon says improving access to good PTSD treatment will break down significant barriers for sufferers who don't have expert help locally or can't easily attend weekly appointments for face-to-face help.

The new model may also better suit the needs of some sufferers, by offering more flexible therapy for those who need less intensive help, while still being effective in treating PTSD and its symptoms.

The trial will begin in March with results evaluated late in 2019.

***Professor Sharon Lawn - Supporting workforce practice change: A pilot study of a motivational interviewing virtual-patient software tool for health professionals***

Motivating patients with comorbid mental and physical health conditions to change their behaviours is crucial across all health professions to address the growing burden of chronic conditions.

But often health professionals lack the skills and confidence to use counselling interventions to motivate and support patients' behaviour change and mobilise the patient's own resources and self-efficacy for change to address their own long-term needs.

Director of Flinders University's Human Behaviour and Health Research Unit, Professor Sharon Lawn and lead researcher Dr Candice Oster, along with a multidisciplinary team of experts across the motivational, educational and virtual space, will use a Grant from Breakthrough Mental Health Research Foundation to develop and pilot test a new motivational interviewing virtual training tool.

This new software will provide health professionals with an accessible and cost-effective training resource to help develop and maintain their motivational interviewing skills.