



These researchers are on the leading edge, with projects that aim to close the many gaps in knowledge about seniors.

Interviews by Antonia Maiolo and Dallas Bastian

After climate change, the ageing of the global population is the most important issue confronting society. And there is much fundamental research into the topic that isn't being done.

This is the concern of University of Melbourne associate professor Briony Dow, director health promotion division at the National Ageing Research Institute.

Dow says the research sector is gaining ground in some areas related to ageing, particularly dementia; however, there are still many questions that remain unanswered.

"A whole range of issues needs to be explored and I don't think there's enough [being] done," Dow says, citing falls prevention as one topic that deserves more of a focus. She says much of government policy "still doesn't have a strong evidence base", so more research is required into how our health system can better respond to the needs of an ageing population.

For our first edition of the year, *Campus Review* spoke to three prominent researchers to get a rundown on current projects related to ageing and future areas of focus.

DO THE BENEFITS OF ASPIRIN OUTWEIGH THE RISKS?



Professor Chris Reid from Monash University is part of the research team undertaking the Aspirin in Reducing Events in the Elderly (ASPREE) study.

ASPREE involves assessing whether daily doses of aspirin keep elderly people healthier for longer through prevention of heart attack, stroke, physical decline, cognitive decline and some cancers.

More than 19,000 people – both men and women – aged 70 and above are taking part in the five-year study, which began in 2013. The team is looking to build upon the extensive research already conducted on the benefits of aspirin therapy.

"What's been reported in the last couple of years has been some small studies suggesting that [aspirin] may be beneficial in reducing the incidence of cognitive decline," Reid says. "Now the problem with small studies is that they're not sufficiently powered enough for us to be able to be very sure of the treatment effects."



"The ASPREE study has been designed specifically to look at not only heart attacks and strokes and those major chronic disease outcomes but also at the impact of aspirin treatment on the prevention of cognitive decline and vascular dementia."

The team will look at how well participants are able to perform cognitive function testing.

"When you're healthy, it does take time to develop the chronic diseases, and we're particularly interested to see whether aspirin therapy over a longer-term treatment period of around five years can delay the onset of those diseases.

"There is some evidence from some previous trials to suggest that, particularly in cancer prevention, it may take a bit of time for the treatment to have an effect on reducing the likelihood of cancers occurring.

"We're [also] going to be following any evidence of hospital admissions for cardiovascular events or for cancers. We'll be ensuring that we're able to detail very accurately how these participants are functioning in the communication over that five-year period.

"We think this five-year period is long enough for us to be able to collect the number of events that are required, but then also to be sure if we do see differences [they] are not due to chance and that there would be a real effect that we're able to report on.

"What we're hoping is that we'll continue to monitor people in the long term."

Reid says the team have been "delighted by the response" from many elderly Australians all over the nation.

"Aspirin is a medication that's been around for many years," he says. "A lot of people are familiar, obviously, with aspirin and its potential effects. Australia has contributed more than 16,500 participants to this 19,000-patient study."

BETTER LEADERSHIP, BETTER AGED CARE



The University of Sydney's professor Yun-Hee Jeon's interest in leadership and management in aged care has led her to conduct Australia's first study on the topic.

Based in the university's faculty of nursing, Jeon says despite no shortage of leadership and management courses in health and aged care, "there's a lack of solid evidence for the effectiveness of the leadership program in the aged-care sector".

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"The relationship between good leadership and workforce retention has long been a topic of healthcare literature and in fact the issue is not just limited to the healthcare sector," Jeon says. "Managers in aged care play a pivotal role in shaping a positive culture by setting and improving the standards of care for the health and wellbeing of aged-care clients and by supporting and leading staff so that together they can achieve maximum outcomes for their clients."

Jeon led the innovative research that evaluated the Clinical Leadership in Aged Care (CLiAC) program, which was aimed at developing leadership capacity. The team examined the effectiveness of CLiAC against three main areas: work environment; quality and safety of patient care; and staff turnover rates.

"[We have found that] leadership and management skills in aged-care managers can be nurtured and used to change leadership behaviours and outcomes. This is not new but it is the first time we have made this link from the perspective of staff using a rigorous

method and proved that such improvements can be made at a reasonable cost. The findings also emphasised the critical component to success – the organisation's strategic support in improving leadership capacity.

"Also, for managers in aged care, we all need [to put in] the time and effort to improve our leadership qualities, no matter how well or poorly experienced we are.

"Accepting the fact we need to make a conscientious and conscious investment and seize any opportunity to work on those leadership qualities is critical in helping not only individual managers themselves but also others who are working as members of the team to improve quality care outcomes."

The results of Jeon's findings are due to be released this year. She hopes they will contribute to "addressing issues facing aged-care services and policymakers concerned with the provision of safe and quality aged-care services".

HOUSEHOLD TECH'S EFFECT ON RECOVERY



Maayken van den Berg, a postdoctoral research fellow from Flinders University, is involved in the world's largest study on whether certain technologies can help patients recover from falls, strokes and brain injuries.

The aim? "To use technology to enhance rehabilitation outcomes without a great increase in cost."

Funded by the NHMRC, this study includes 300 patients recruited from the rehabilitation units at Adelaide Repatriation General Hospital, as well as Bankstown Hospital and the Brain Injury Rehab Unit at Liverpool Hospital – both in Sydney.

The team aims to build on the result of a pilot study, which featured 60 patients and showed the use of exergames is a feasible and acceptable way to promote mobility and activity levels. Results also showed improvements in balance and gait.

"In the new study, we [will assess] whether a wider range of equipment technologies can lead to improvement in other aspects of mobility as well," van den Berg confirms.

Researchers are recruiting in three groups, including one that focuses on older people and another on middle-aged to older people recovering from stroke. The third is one on younger brain injury patients.

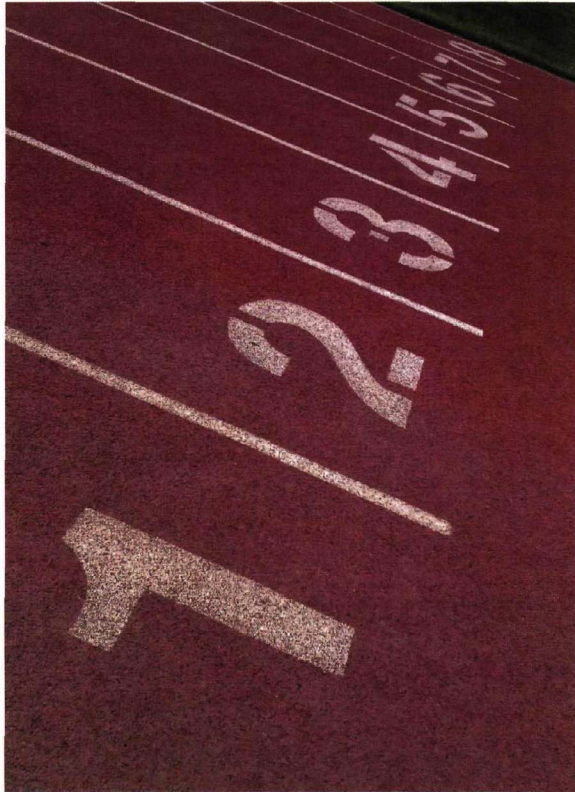
Wii Fit, Xbox Kinect and pedometers such as Fitbits will be used, as well as 'stepping tiles' designed at UTS and exercise apps developed by Flinders University and The George Institute.

Feedback about performance of simple exercises will be fed back to patients through the game controls or onscreen.

"We have chosen to use a variety of technology," van den Berg says. "We [do not] expect that every technology will be suitable for every patient, so we don't use a single approach. Instead, we use a wider range of devices and games."

Feedback from patients thus far is positive and the hospitals involved are happy with the progress, she says.

"We hope to show that the use of technology, including household technology, is a way to increase the dosage of practice in rehabilitation clinics, but also in the home environment. In other words, that it's a way to improve rehabilitation outcomes at low costs." ■



Rank and guile

Debate has long raged over journal rankings systems and their sway over academic careers; here, a panel assembled from across the seniority spectrum gives arguments for and against the status quo and discusses strategies for success.



JASON SHARMAN
PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS, GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

Whether it is for hiring, promotion, allocating scarce grant funds or any number of other purposes, there is a need to assess the quality of academics' published research. There are other ways of allocating such rewards

in academia – by family connections or friendship networks, for example – but these do not meet meritocratic criteria.

From the inception of the Howard government's Research Quality Framework until shortly before the 2012 Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) round, journal rankings were used for this purpose. These rankings aroused much controversy at the time and since, but I believe they are a reasonably fair and objective way of assessing our scholarly research, relative to the available alternatives.

This 'relative to' proviso is important. Academics will and should be assessed on their research, the question is how.

The old system in Australia, which continues in some aspects of the funding formula, was simply to count the number of publications (books counting for five articles or chapters). This system was crazy and destructive in creating strong incentives to produce a large volume of mediocre work. It doesn't pass the laugh test overseas, nor should it in Australia. Critics of journal rankings should think about whether they really want to go back that system. In the absence of citation measures and journal rankings for many fields, ERA essentially leaves everyone (including the assessors) guessing as to what counts as a good, bad or indifferent publication. As a result, where we should have assessments that are transparent, replicable and accountable, we instead have one that is opaque, ad hoc and unaccountable.

Internationally, academics are assessed according to informal journal rankings. In the US, at least in my field (political science), academics at leading universities must publish with a few top journals and book presses to get tenure. Publications outside this charmed circle count for nothing, or perhaps are even a net negative. The UK has the Research Evaluation Framework, which ostensibly depends on a committee in each discipline reading nominated publications in order to score departments. In practice, however, it is a fairly open secret that both nominating departments and assessors use journals as a proxy of quality.

People will inevitably use shortcuts in assessing the quality of academics' publications. Given this fact, we should strive for those that are public, produced by deliberation within the field, and can be applied to all equally. The alternatives encourage mediocrity, or serve to entrench the power of privileged insiders in a position to dispense patronage.



MARK CHOU
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF
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UNIVERSITY

For the first few years of my academic career, I largely ignored journal rankings. My approach was simply to publish in the journals I read and respected without

much regard for how they ranked. In retrospect, I did this to my own detriment.

Rankings and metrics cast a disproportionate influence over an academic's career prospects. In some ways, where you publish has become more important than what you publish. This is particularly the case for early-career academics. One of the first things a hiring committee will do is assess an applicant's publication track record against journal metrics. How many A* or Q1 publications does the applicant have? Conversely, how many of the applicant's publications are placed in unranked outlets? Even at non-Go8 universities, which have traditionally emphasised teaching over research, rankings and metrics are increasingly used to reward and punish staff.

But playing the rankings game comes with its own frustrations. For instance, anyone familiar with the now-defunct ERA journal ranking, SCImago's journal rank or the Journal Citation Reports will know that rankings tend to fluctuate, sometimes yearly. Journals can be ranked as Q1 or A one year only to be classified as Q2 or C the following year. Researchers are now encouraged to place publications in appropriately ranked outlets. Yet this becomes tricky when what's



deemed appropriate can change, without warning, from one year to the next.

The other problem that's often raised is this: journal rankings are inherently conservative. They promote uniformity and stifle creativity. Publishing in the top-ranked disciplinary journals means, more often than not, running the gauntlet of gatekeepers whose job it is to maintain a discipline's conventions. Research that challenges this, or fails to speak the right language and use the favoured methodologies, will find itself unlikely to pass the supposedly objective peer review. Innovative research that does not fit into neat disciplinary moulds becomes collateral damage in a system that pegs rankings to quality.

However frustrating rankings become though, it's important researchers don't abandon them. There are ways to play the rankings game and still publish what you want, how you want and where you want. A key strategy in this regard is adopting what's known as triple publishing. The idea behind this concept is that any piece of research should ideally speak to more than one audience. Researchers should be engaging not just with their sub-disciplines but the entirety of their discipline. This of course means publishing one's research in specialist journals, even unranked ones. But it also means revising that same research so it does speak the language favoured in the top-ranked disciplinary journals. However, triple publishing goes further than speaking to "a very small audience of hyper-knowledgeable, mutually acquainted specialists", as Joshua Rothman put it [last February] in *The New Yorker*. It asks researchers to think seriously about how their research might or should engage with public debates. For the philosopher John Armstrong, this is perhaps the most regrettable by-product of the rise of rankings and metrics: that university research no longer seeks to influence what goes on in the public realm. Whilst contemporary academics probably can't live on op-eds and non-fiction alone, particularly if they want jobs and promotions within the university, triple publishing might help provide a way to satisfy university administrators and, with any luck, one's own intellectual integrity.



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As early-career researchers and journal editors, we have a unique perspective into how journal rankings – which are not without their merits – have created a host of problems. Some of these are well-known enough. Take bandwagoning: the practice of encouraging research on subjects where the highest-ranked publication outlets are found. Or jingoism: where certain journals are elevated for reasons other than their

content. Or gaming: the practice of encouraging scholars to write into journals or subject areas the rankings favour.

All of these practices work to narrow the possible knowledge claims within research. Despite this, research that's published in A* journals, which most often favour conventional approaches, continue to be encouraged and rewarded – with tenure, promotions and funding. But at the other end of the scale, the reverse is true. Research published in C or even unranked journals is disregarded, irrespective

of its actual quality or contribution to knowledge. Some researchers have even been forced to disseminate their work via other means, for example blogs. Denigrating forms of knowledge in the name of some [supposedly] objective standard is the most dangerous thing we can do with ideas.

It's good to recall the warning sounded by then-tertiary education minister Kim Carr in abandoning the ERA rankings system in 2012: "There is clear and consistent evidence that the rankings were being deployed inappropriately within some quarters of the sector, in ways that could produce harmful outcomes, and based on a poor understanding of the actual role of the rankings. One common example was the setting of targets for publication in A and A* journals by institutional research managers."

We see no reason why this frank yet damning assessment no longer holds.

Nor can any revised journal rankings system – such as those discipline associations have devised – be considered objective. The criterion of assessment continues to be opaque, leading to vast differences in how individual journals have been assessed. Take the 1606 and 1605 code for example. Most journals were ranked according to their impact factors, but also their editorial boards or other subjective factors. Journals were elevated or demoted sometimes due to very arbitrary concerns. A look at the discrepancy between the ERA 2010 list and the Australian Political Studies Association list of 2013 shows, for instance, the demotion of certain critical journals or the disregard paid to multidisciplinary research (only six journals out of 122 are listed as multidisciplinary).

Of course, we must have a basis to assess research quality. But journal rankings have moved from being an indicative measure to a fetish. Performance metrics divorced from an individual's actual academic output and public engagement are insufficient and misleading.

Committing to a genuine plurality of research outlets, resourcing the peer-review process, having a number of indicators of research excellence (rather than just rankings), and ensuring search committees actively engage a candidate's work rather than just glancing at a CV for their rankings, are far more robust means of assessing research excellence than a deeply politicised list of journals. ■

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