

Laying a foundation

TANIA LIM AND MELISSA MILNE

Dr Gillian Gould's first RACGP Foundation grant may not have been the largest, but it proved a great way to get a foot in the door to the vital world of GP research.

RACGP Foundation grants

If coming up with innovative ways to treat patients gets you thinking, GP-based medical research could be suited to you. The RACGP Foundation has numerous grants on offer to members interested in conducting research. Call (03) 8699 0497 or visit www.racgp.org.au/foundation for more information. Grant applications close Monday 5 May 2014.



Dr Gillian Gould with Dr Tom Calma, National Coordinator of the Tackling Indigenous Smoking measure.

Who would have thought a small rock tossed into a pond would cause such a big ripple for a recipient of an RACGP Foundation grant?

When Dr Gillian Gould, a GP and tobacco treatment specialist in NSW, received a relatively small \$2500 research grant from the RACGP back in 2008, it set her on the path to developing her skills. Years later, she was awarded almost three-quarters of a million dollars in funding from the Department of Health and Ageing's Indigenous Tobacco Control initiative, as well as a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and Heart Foundation scholarship.

Humble beginnings

Gould became involved in academic medicine in 2002 when she started working for the University of New South Wales' Rural Clinical School in Coffs Harbour. She was soon offered the opportunity to manage a smoking cessation program through the Mid North Coast Division of General Practice (now North Coast Medicare Local) and began running Quit groups across the mid-north coast for the next decade. Smoking cessation quickly became the driving force in Gould's career.

'It is one of the single most important things people can do for their health,' she told *Good Practice*.

Gould's success with Quit groups soon saw her being approached by the doctors at the Galambila Aboriginal Health Service in Coffs Harbour, who were hoping to work on smoking cessation among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Galambila GPs believed Gould could help develop a program that was more culturally appropriate in a community where smoking is a big health issue. By 2006, funding became available through the Cancer Institute of New South Wales to further develop the existing Quit groups.

'We worked very closely with the [Galambila] Aboriginal Medical Service to develop this program called Give Up the Smokes, which was still a group program for people to attend Quit groups,' Gould said.

This saw the creation of a range of teaching and 'train the trainer' materials that helped teach Aboriginal health workers and doctors

at Galambila about how to run the program. In 2008, Gould successfully applied for the RACGP/Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI) Indigenous Health Award (IHA) to fund an evaluation of the program.

'That was the first grant I applied for that I got,' she said. 'It was only a small amount of money, \$2500, but that helped to fund that first evaluation.'

This initial success was followed by other grants and funding, which in turn led to further development of smoking cessation strategies for smokers in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, as well as a number of other programs.

Using her grants, Gould has since developed Give Up the Smokes into a more comprehensive tobacco program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples called No Smokes North Coast and, in 2010, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing provided Gould with a grant of \$700,000 for her work in the Indigenous Tobacco Control Initiative. This major funding injection has allowed further expansion of the Quit groups, improvements to training programs and the development of a Blow Away the Smokes DVD resource.

Varied pathway

Although now a successful GP and tobacco treatment specialist, Gould's main focus wasn't always medicine.

'I always had this very strong leaning towards the arts and drama, so I had about four years where ... my main focus [was] in the performing arts,' she said.

Tapping into these different interests, Gould was able to incorporate her interest in arts and health into an art-based program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in schools looking at the effects of tobacco.

After her initial success with the IHA grant, Gould received the 2010 Standing Strong Together Award from the RACGP National Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (also presented to then Galambila CEO David Kennedy). She is now undertaking a PhD at James Cook University on the development of salient anti-tobacco



Clockwise from above: Gould (left) receives her 2013 RACGP/Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute Indigenous Health award from Professor Jenny Reath, Deputy Chair of the RACGP's National Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health; recruiting smokers for the latest Indigenous Health Award study at the 2014 Saltwater Freshwater Festival on the NSW mid-north coast; Gould makes use of her arts background in her work in smoking cessation.

messages for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander smokers, supported by an NHMRC and National Heart Foundation training scholarship for Indigenous Australian health research.

Gould also received an RACGP Rex Walpole Travelling Fellowship to support her attendance at the Oceania Tobacco Conference in Auckland in 2013, as well as another RACGP/Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute Indigenous Health Award.

Getting started

For Gould, the grants process is 'like hopping from one thing to another'. Not only did that first grant provide her with more opportunities to apply for further funding, it also gave her the confidence to do so.

'The thing that was good about the first one was just getting my foot in the door with the RACGP grant. It's encouraging that you can actually get a grant,' she said. 'You're building some sort of track record, so when you go for other grants, you can see that you have already [received] some.'

'The track record I had from the RACGP was important in helping me get my NHMRC [grant].'

Gould encourages other GPs to get involved in medical research, believing it is an important and valuable part of general practice that can sometimes be overlooked.

'I think it adds another dimension to your practice and it gets you thinking a bit differently,' she explained. 'For me, it was a bit of a leap to try and think like a researcher.'

'You might not actually have those research skills – I definitely didn't at the beginning – but since then I have fairly intensively studied epidemiology, statistics, and I can do most of my own stats now.'

Cultural awareness

Given the significant cultural diversity that exists throughout Australia, Gould encourages all GPs to consider research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, but believes it is important to be aware of, and work within, this diversity.

'There are no generalisations to make because people come from different tribal groups and Australia is a huge country,' she said. 'If one is going to be involved with [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] research, it is important to build up your cultural awareness ... [have] cultural mentors and preferably work in a more participatory model with communities. You need to do a lot of community engagement.'

In addition, Gould believes there are certain criteria that need to be addressed when working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, which will in turn help identify what is improving and where the gaps are that need to be addressed.

'How is it going to benefit the community? How are you going to reciprocate? You're thinking about how their cultural values and spiritual values need to be upheld,' she said. 'And when you report on those things, you need to understand in tandem with Aboriginal researcher methodology, so you're not just reporting the negatives all the time, because it gets quite depressing.'

'There are positives. One needs to understand how to be truthful in your reporting, but find out the more positive side of it as well.'

Given a career in research has done so much for her and her ability to work with communities and people in need, Gould believes it also allows others to attain a better understanding and clear interpretation of evidence-based medicine.

'I would encourage people to do it [research] because I think it adds a different interest when you start looking at new patients.'