In March 2015, when the National Health and Medical Research Council notified that Sydney Health Partners was one of four groups in Australia to be recognised as an Advanced Health Research and Translation Centre (or AHRTC), a frequent response was “Sydney Health Partners – what is that?”. Sydney Health Partners was not a well-known name, but recognition by the NHMRC was no small achievement. The award was on the basis of demonstrated excellence in research, the translation of evidence into patient care and a strong focus on research and translation in the education of health professionals.

Of the twelve submissions made to the NHMRC for recognition as an Academic Health Research and Translation Centre, Sydney, along with Alfred Health and Monash Health and Partners, Melbourne Health Partners and a South Australian consortium, were judged against six criteria by an international review panel to be of world class:

- Leadership in outstanding research and evidence-based clinical care, including for the most difficult clinical conditions,
- Excellence in innovative biomedical, clinical, public health and health services research,
- Programs and activities to accelerate research findings into health care and ways of bringing health care problems to the researchers
- Research-infused education and training
- Health professional leaders who ensure that research knowledge is translated into policies and practices locally, nationally and internationally
- Strong collaboration amongst the research, translation, patient care and education programs.

“These centres are producing first class research, and they are succeeding in turning those research outcomes into improved patient care,” said then CEO of NHMRC Professor Warwick Anderson. “Being recognised as an NHMRC Advanced Research and Translation Centre acknowledges that their work is up there with the best in the world.”

SYDNEY HEALTH WHOM?

Sydney Health Partners was formed in July 2014 to prepare the NHMRC submission. It comprises Northern Sydney, Sydney and Western Sydney Local Health Districts, the Children’s Hospital Network (Westmead), the University of Sydney and their related research institutions.

In scale, Sydney Health Partners is impressive: between them, the partners employ 33,000 staff and provide health care to 2.6 million people, 50% of NSW population and over 10% or 1 in 7 of the Australian population.

It was clearly stated in the application that in line with the intentions of the NHMRC, Sydney Health Partners would seek to improve the quality of health care by applying the insights of research. Specifically, it will:

- Undertake research and translational activities that enhance what members do individually
- Add value to, and eliminate inefficiencies and duplication in, health research and translational activities of members including by sharing specific expertise, facilities and equipment; and
- Develop sustainable and innovative mechanisms for rapidly translating research and latest evidence into clinical and health practice to secure better health outcomes

Chief executive of Sydney Local Health District, Dr Teresa Anderson, said the recognition as an AHTRC was testament to the collective strength of the partners and also a pointer to the enormous future potential. “I am sure the formalisation of the partnership will be a great boost to the research, education and healthcare we provide.”

The view from the University and research institutes is similar – all are looking for the

SYDNEY HEALTH PARTNERS – VISION

“Through strong collaboration, inclusive thinking and a passion for overcoming barriers, Sydney Health Partners will transform the way we do things and together create solutions to meet the health needs of our community and the wider population wherever care is delivered.”

To achieve this vision, Partners will:

- Collaborate to synchronise our research, education and clinical agendas;
- Dismantle existing silos and barriers to improve access, efficiency and outcomes;
- Encourage free movement of data, people and resources;
- Introduce robust measurement, monitoring and evaluation systems;
- Partner with internal colleagues and external agencies alike.
closer collaborations enabled and fostered by the formalisation of the partnership to drive improvements in health care.

In bringing together such a large group, across such a range of research, education and health care, a not-insignificant challenge has been defining an appropriate governance and management structure.

A proposed structure, comprising a peak governing body – the Governing Council – and Executive Management Committee and a management team led by a Director, has now been developed, providing a strong base for future activities.

**FUTURE PLANS**

Being recognised as an Advanced Health Research and Translation Centre has provided impetus to clinicians and managers to collaborate more than ever.

Twelve thematic streams have been identified as flagships for collaborative translational research.

The first six discipline-specific themes are those identified as our research translation strengths in the NHMRC submission: cancer; cardio-metabolic; infectious diseases; liver; mental health and neurosciences; and renal transplant. The remaining six are cross cutting themes, considered to be integral to the future success of the partnership: biobanking; clinical trials; education; genomics; informatics; and operational enablers.

“While the twelve thematic streams are at various stages of collaboration, already we see exciting projects emerging,” Dr Anderson said.

The **cardio-metabolic team** are well advanced in establishing cross-campus rapid-access clinics for patients with cardio-metabolic disease. These are designed both to improve care for patients and to reduce long waits in the emergency department.

The **liver team** plans to measure, and increase the uptake of, new hepatitis B and C treatments across the partnership in a fine example of the translation of basic research (developing new personalised medicines) into clinical treatment and improved health outcomes.

The **clinical trials thematic stream** plans to improve the recruitment to, and outcomes from, clinical trials by introducing more robust monitoring and measuring systems, strengthening and harmonising the clinical trial governance and management arrangements and advocating more strongly with clinicians and patients to improve both the understanding of the importance of clinical trials and their integrity, number and size.

**Operational Enablers** is an important thematic stream that has already determined its priorities for streamlining research processes. These include strengthening the grant integrity assessment, submission standards and timing, and post award management and compliance; harmonising material transfer agreements and site-specific authorisations, streamlining research ethics approval processes, and modernising our communication systems.

**NEXT STEPS**

The next key activity is the first “**SHP Annual Forum**” will be held on the 25 - 26 February 2016 and will be an opportunity to showcase our achievements so far and reassess any areas that need reconsideration.

Sydney Health Partners looks forward to achieving our mutual aim of encouraging collaboration and strengthening the translation of basic research into health outcomes.
In September 2014, research workers in three Sydney health districts, the Westmead Children’s Hospital and their affiliated institutes – all associated with the University of Sydney – opened the vaults of the translational research they had been conducting in recent years. The purpose was to provide an exhibition of the depth of research, the highlights and major achievements, and to demonstrate how this research has improved patient care and enhanced opportunities for prevention.

The exercise had elements of a grand art gallery fossicking in its stored collection for works that demonstrate the richness of its holdings.

I had the pleasure of working with a dedicated editorial team which, on behalf of the partnership drew together statements of achievement from their research groups. Sixty-six pages later we had documented a staggering array of research concerning virtually every aspect of contemporary health and disease.

**THE AHRTC CONCEPT**

This exercise was a response to a call from the National Health and Medical Research Council – NHMRC – to health organisations for recognition as Advanced Health and Translational Research Centres or AHRTCs. The NHMRC wrote: “We wish to promote stronger nodes of excellence in Australia’s health care system itself [not just in universities and institutes], so that research and its translation bring the best possible health care delivery to Australian hospitals, equal to the best in the world.

To achieve recognition centres had to be renowned for the complexity of their clinical care, to demonstrate outstanding research capability and to show how this translated into innovations in disease prevention and management. Centres were also asked to indicate how they embedded capacity-building for future researchers into the enterprise. Twelve centres applied. Applications were assessed by an international panel and eight were invited to interview. In March 2015 we learned that Sydney Health Partners, as we call ourselves, was one among four successful applicants.

**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

The submission was not to seek money, although plainly the anticipation of funding in the future provided an incentive. Rather, our task was to demonstrate to the Australian community and to state and territory governments how active and useful the research conducted within our health system is.

As the inventorying and sifting concluded we were astonished by the massive contribution research is making to clinical care, here and now – much more than we ever recognised or talked about. And a lot of it crossed institutional boundaries. Research enterprise in relation to renal disease for example was present in all the health districts and frequently the clinical care based on the research improved right across Sydney as a result. Collaboration as well as competition was evident.
Translational research – the process whereby clinical questions trigger a research agenda and where in turn research findings activate changes in clinical practice – was obvious at every turn. Of course, the back-and-forth ferrying of research cargo between ward and laboratory has been a characteristic of clinical research from time immemorial. However, like the closed boxes of the paintings in the reserve collection, it is easily overlooked or even forgotten. The AHRTC exercise opened the repositories to reveal a fine display.

We wrote in the covering letter of our application to NHMRC about our hopes and aspirations.

“The exercise … has encouraged us to consider the future with fresh optimism: if we have achieved this much, then imagine what we might do in the future. The information science, genomic and neuroscience revolution in health and medical research is tantalising in what it offers and magnetic in its attraction to do more, to aim higher, to explore new frontiers. For those ineradicably committed to addressing the needs of sick people this is heady stuff.

“Einstein said ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.’ We can imagine a positive future to which we contribute, built through collaboration and realised through research translation.”

The solid work of bringing this all together has already begun. The omens are good with strong support from all participant groups, upon whose creativity and energy, the enterprise will ultimately depend.

Stephen Leeder is Emeritus Professor in the School of Public Health, Chair of the Board and Director, Research and Education Network at Western Sydney Local Health District.