

# Trunk Line

## Reimagining mental health in regional Australia

October 2023 / Edition 5



Everymind Director Dr Jaelea Skehan OAM and Manna Institute Director Professor Myfanwy Maple in Slovenia.

## Manna milestones with Myf

Welcome to our fifth edition of Trunk Line, coming to you from afar as I have been with Everymind Director Jaelea Skehan and over 100 other Australians at the International Association for Suicide Prevention World Congress in Slovenia. This was the first opportunity for many of us to meet with international colleagues since COVID, providing space to refresh relationships and discuss new ideas for future projects.

In addition to individual presentations, Jaelea and I presented collaborative work we undertook for the National Mental Health Commission, which examines the way in which lived experience is discussed publicly and privately. This is particularly important for regional Australia, given the higher burden suicide and mental illness has outside of metropolitan areas. Reducing barriers to care through clear communication in the media is vital.

It's an exceptionally busy time of year for all of us at Manna. Fresh from our successful strategy days, teams working across our research streams are finalising important priorities, developing projects and actively seeking funding to pursue them. Our collaborative effort to foster the relevant research and professional workforces that will translate into practical programs for rural and regional Australians is gathering pace.

*Continued ...*

## Monthly overview

**Thursday 5 October**, our webinar will explore the topic **Content and connection: How we talk about mental health, suicide and missing persons in the media and its impact on rural communities.**

It will feature special guests Sophie Scott OAM, PhD candidate Elise Carrotte from the School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Melbourne, and Associate Professor Sarah Wayland.

### October is Mental Health

**Awareness Month.** In this issue of Trunk Line you will hear how postdoctoral research fellow Dr Dan Wadsworth maintains good mental health. I encourage every member of Manna to similarly pause and reflect on how they are tracking. The work that we do can be emotionally and physically demanding. So while it's full steam ahead, I urge you to invest in your own wellbeing just as much as you are investing in the mental health of people in rural and regional Australia.

With Ruthie Rule now preparing for the birth of her second child, we **welcome Kat McKai** to the Manna team. Kat will step into the Project Administrator role on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Please make her feel welcome.

## Manna milestones with Myf (continued)

Our in-person meeting, kindly hosted by Southern Cross University's Gold Coast campus, highlighted Manna's strengths – our people. It was particularly heart-warming to watch animated discussions, full of possibility. Too often, regional mental health researchers are working in isolation. Unquestionably, Manna's most valuable contribution to date is bringing us together, to establish new and dynamic networks that are enabling us to leverage our expertise in powerful ways.

But while the strategy days proved a great opportunity to reflect on what we have achieved in just 18 months, it was also a timely reminder that we have lots yet to accomplish. We have no shortage of great ideas, expertise or goodwill. Now, our biggest challenge is maintaining Manna's momentum and turning enthusiasm to action, and securing funding beyond our initial three-year investment.

The project office is now focused on government reporting requirements, due at the end of this month. While we concentrate

on these important administrative requirements, others in our broad network are reviewing Manna Institute position papers on topics of vital importance for the Rural and Remote Mental Health Symposium to be held in Albury. It will also be a fantastic chance for our newly formed stream leaders to shape their next steps.

Congratulations, too, to the seven Manna members who have been accepted to present at the Society of Mental Health Research (SMHR) conference in late November in Perth. As all this is swirling around us, it's equally important that we focus on advancing our research. I encourage all Manna members to investigate the exciting MRFF Million Minds funding opportunities due late November and to take advantage of the support we are offering with grant applications.

Contact the project office for more information at [mannainstitute@une.edu.au](mailto:mannainstitute@une.edu.au)

## Stop Press!

**In another major coup for Manna, we now have representation on the influential Mental Health Reform Advisory Committee (MHRAC), which is discussing major reforms to Australia's mental health and suicide prevention system.**

The committee is tasked with shaping and supporting the Australian Government's response to the Better Access evaluation and broader mental health reforms, and Manna's director Professor Myf Maple is now one of its members.

She joins the Minister for Health and Aged Care (and committee chair) Mark Butler, Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, Emma McBride, medical specialists, First Nations representatives, carer and consumer advocates, and representatives of Beyond Blue and the Black Dog Institute.

The MHRAC has already held two meetings and will continue gathering until December to consider how to improve arrangements for triage, assessment and referral to better support the mental health needs of Australians.



# World-first research to address mental health need

**A Manna Institute research team has received a \$900,000 National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grant to investigate how to improve the physical health of people living with severe mental illness in rural and regional Australia.**

The world-first project will test a model that positions carers as 'care navigators' to help address poor life expectancy rates and serious workforce shortages.

People with mental illness are almost three times more likely to die prematurely, compared to their metropolitan counterparts. Underdiagnosed and untreated chronic health conditions, such as cancer and heart disease, can reduce their life expectancy by 13-20 years.

This research project seeks to tackle both the mental and physical needs of individuals for the first time. It involves 25 researchers from nine Australian universities in a unique collaboration between [Equally Well Australia](#) and [Manna Institute](#).

Equally Well Australia National Director and Lead Researcher Professor Russell Roberts said engaging people with a lived experience of mental illness promises a two-fold benefit.

"People with mental illness also frequently have difficulty accessing appropriate physical health care services," he said. "This research will support the Equally Well mission of preventing premature deaths due to largely preventable physical conditions. In addition, it aims to support the existing rural mental health workforce, which must adopt a different model of care than in metropolitan areas due to workforce shortages and limited access to targeted services."

Manna Institute Director, Professor Myfanwy Maple from the University of New England, said the research is vitally important

to those living with mental illness in regional communities. "Services are difficult to access, and when services are stretched the focus of an appointment becomes the person's mental health needs, neglecting their physical health needs," she said. "This leads to treatable illnesses and diseases becoming chronic and shortening people's lives.

"Manna brings researchers from across the Regional Universities Network together with industry partners to design projects with and led by people with lived experience. This research is a fantastic example of how, by working together, we can develop solutions to complex challenges that impact the health and wellbeing of regional Australians."

By investigating the supportive role played by informal caregivers and peer workers, researchers develop additional pathways for people with mental illness. "Peer workers are really important in having a unique insight into the lived experience of mental ill-health and can help advocate for others who may not be able to navigate complex health systems on their own," Professor Roberts said. "This will take some pressure off our already stretched mental health and physical health carers."

Improving the poor physical health and reduced life expectancy of people living with mental illness is a priority of the [Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan](#), a key recommendation of the [Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health](#) and an action of the [National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement](#).



Prof Russell Roberts, Manna Chief Investigator, CSU.



A/Prof. Christian Swann, Manna Chief Investigator, SCU.

*Manna collaborators include Dr Belinda Cash, Postdoctoral Fellow, CSU, Senior Research Fellow Hazel Dalton, Charles Sturt University, Senior Researcher Associate Professor Julaine Allan, Charles Sturt University and PLG FN representative Associate Professor Faye McMillan.*

## Getting to the heART of Manna

**A big thank you to artist and PhD student Kisani Upward, who shared her unique take on the recent Manna strategy days as our artist-in-residence.**

Floating between the groups, Kisani observed, listened and synthesised our discussions into a thoughtful and inspiring oral and visual presentation.

“I use art as a way to understand concepts and record information; it’s a practice I use in my own research into the impact of the 2019-20 bushfires on First Nations communities,” said Kisani, a Kamilaroi-Wiradjuri woman and registered nurse. “At Coolangatta, I got to meet some truly incredible people and to learn about how their research contributes to Manna’s objectives.

“It is a diverse group of people, with different backgrounds and personal experiences, but what struck me is how everyone is working together equally. It’s all about inclusion and valuing each other’s opinion. There is a feeling that Manna provides a safe space to present your perspectives, no matter what they are. Everyone was there because they cared and wanted to make a difference.”

As a self-confessed “yarner”, Kisani sought to capture

what Manna represents in her narrative. Forest sketches also drew on the interconnectedness of Manna gums, those powerful symbols of rural, regional and remote Australia. “Manna members spoke about their projects with such determination and hope, and, like any bushland ecosystem, they are deeply connected,” Kisani said. “In any forest, there is an underground fungal network that connects every tree – it’s a means of sharing nutrients and communicating. It’s a natural metaphor for how Manna works.”

While we were each taking our own notes of conversations and discussions, Kisani was reflecting our goals and progress like a mirror. “It was incredible to be in a room with so many dedicated people, for me as an artist and researcher,” she said. “I was so inspired by the passion people brought and I could feel how energised they were. As an HDR student, I hope to become one of them.”



## Spotlight on HDR students

### Networks capturing opportunities

One of our primary goals in establishing Manna was to inspire collaboration across mental health research in rural and regional Australia. We are thrilled this is happening organically as we expand the institute's network and reach.

A fantastic example of this comes from the University of the Sunshine Coast's Dr Daniel Wadsworth, who with fellow postdoctoral fellow Dr Belinda Cash, from Charles Sturt University, is leading the Regional Older Adults Mental (ROAM) Health study with the support of research fellow Dr Mia Schaumberg, also from the University of the Sunshine Coast.

No sooner had Dan and his team updated us on ROAM at the Gold Coast strategy days than he was presenting at the HMRI workshop on Manna projects focused on healthy ageing.

"The larger goal is to develop a large-scale Community Healthy Ageing Initiative funding application for a suite of projects, led by Professor Frini Karayanidis," Dan said. "Mia Schaumberg has joined an initial University of Newcastle collaborative grant, representing Manna. There seems to be a strong alignment between HMRI and Manna's work in the ageing space and I'm excited to see where it takes us. And it all came about from Myf lining up an initial introduction."



Pictured clockwise from top: Sonia Diab HDR CSU, Alex Potter HDR UNE, David Duncan HDR UniSC, Jesse Baker HDR UniSC, Danna Lee HDR UniSC.

## New HDR Community of Practice

On another front, Dan has kindly agreed to head up a community of practice (CoP) for Manna, to support the training and research development of our HDR students.

"It's essentially a collective of individuals supporting each other and learning from one another, sharing their experiences and challenges in a safe space," Dan said. "This is doubly important for Manna's geographically dispersed researchers."

Although he is leading the CoP, Dan said its ownership needs to be shared by member HDR students. "If done well, the enthusiasm of a CoP is infectious; it brings everybody along," he said.

The HDR CoP will meet monthly over Teams, starting with its first session on 9 October to agree on goals and expectations. The second session will be face-to-face at the Rural Mental Health Conference in Albury in November.

To learn more about Dan, turn to Finding the Sun on page 6.

If you would like to join the Manna Institute CoP, you can find the [EOI form here](#).

## First Nations expertise and insights

### Manna is committed to embedding First Nations perspectives and strategies in everything we do.

Genuinely reflecting the views and needs of First Nations peoples – from our board of governance right through to the implementation of our research projects – helps to ensure that our projects are collaborative, informed, relevant and translatable.

Like our lived experience representatives, our 11 First Nations representatives enrich Manna’s work. Their input guarantees that those closest to the issues we are seeking to address are walking with us on this journey and feel supported in developing their own research capacity and models. Only then, together, can we implement solutions that are fit for purpose.

So, we are pleased to announce that our First Nations Working Group has held its first “yarn-up” and will be guiding us in developing actions to position First Nations peoples at the heart of our work. Holding space for First Nations people so they can safely connect and contribute to Manna’s work is critically important. It will help to ensure that our community engagement and research is culturally sensitive and respectful.

First Nations representatives have been contributing informally from the very beginning to Manna’s leadership and training programs. As we move forward, we are keen to establish more formal roles and mentoring possibilities for them, and to explore new opportunities to support First Nations researchers across our partner universities. Our First Nations representatives have and will continue to guide us to deepen our knowledge about the principles of working with First Nations peoples in regional communities and contribute to the development of best-practice policies and procedures.

In addition to our First Nations Working Group, Manna continues to explore productive ways to partner with industry and government to raise the voices of First Nations peoples in critical discussions around mental health provision and building the capacity of our dedicated First Nations mental health workforce. Manna representatives will soon meet with the Director Aboriginal Mental Health within the Mental Health Branch of the NSW Ministry of Health, Matthew Trindall, to discuss just that.

Thank you to our First Nations representatives for your contributions, and to Professor Joe Fraser for his inspiring leadership in this area.

## Finding the Sun

### Dr Daniel Wadsworth, ECR postdoctoral research fellow, University of the Sunshine Coast

“Fortunately we have a dog, 9-year-old Labraspoodle Darcy, and every day he makes me go out and walk twice a day around local streets and parks. I find the early evening walk, after dinner, a good opportunity to decompress. I put on a podcast and, unlike at home, get to listen to what I want to while I am walking.



But spending time with my family is what keeps me healthy and happy, and my family is the most important thing to me. Our five-year-old daughter Poppy is quite lively and keeps us on our toes, but she helps me to maintain a clear distinction between work and family.

The third thing that is important for my mental health and wellbeing is living near the ocean. I don’t need to go there all the time – and I don’t go as often as I would like – but knowing it is close-by helps to ground me. Visiting the ocean gives me the opportunity to stop, reflect and appreciate where I am.”

And Dan’s podcast recommendation? “I mostly listen to comedy podcasts and I like *Off Menu*,” he said. “It’s nice to reflect on what my dream meal would consist of.”

## Manna Institute’s Acknowledgement of Country

Manna Institute respectfully acknowledges the First Nations peoples as the continuing custodians of this continent and pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging. The institute honours their rich cultural heritage, beliefs and enduring relationship to the lands and communities in which we all live, learn and work.

## Webinar – Thursday 5 October, 12-1pm AEDT



In October, for Mental Health Awareness Month, our webinar will explore the topic

**Content and connection: How we talk about mental health, suicide and missing persons in the media and its impact on rural communities.**

We'd be delighted if you could join us.

**Please register in advance**

**If you missed our September or any of our previous webinars, you can access all the recordings [here](#).**

**Next month: Monday 13 November, 12-1pm**

**Our topic is: Embracing change: the role of AI and online technology in mental health support.**

### Featuring special guests:

**Sophie Scott OAM**, PhD candidate **Elise Carrotte** from the School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Melbourne, and Associate Professor **Sarah Wayland**, who will be moderating and presenting on media as a health promotion tool. Our conversations are underpinned by the **Mindframe media guidelines**, from our Everymind partners.

These presentations are proving a wonderful opportunity to discuss a range of topics of practical relevance to Manna's work. Participants are applauding the welcoming atmosphere created by moderator Associate Professor Sarah Wayland, and enjoying rich conversations both in the online chat and long afterwards.

At Manna, we are genuine about creating safe, supportive spaces in which our members can share and learn. We are endeavouring to model the kinds of thoughtful, collaborative partnerships that will build personal capacity and inspire tailored solutions for our priority populations.

In last month's webinar, on co-design, we discussed the importance of lived experience inclusion, not as an afterthought but as a foundation of good research. Speakers interrogated the way we work and reflected on the importance of empowering the individuals and communities that are key to research design and future decision-making.

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**SOCIETY FOR MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2023**  
**PEOPLE & PLACE**  
 29 Nov – 1 Dec 2023 | Rendezvous Hotel Perth Scarborough WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
 www.smhrconference.com.au

## In the news

### Creative ambitions: Healthy ageing project could start a movement

A very simple creative project at the University of the Sunshine Coast has hit on a winning formula for improving the lives of older Australians.

[READ MORE](#)



## Trunk Line

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If you are not already on our mailing list, then you're missing out!

It's a fantastic way to keep abreast of Manna matters and to share in our progress.

[Subscribe to Trunk Line today](#)



## Prevention in Practice Summit 2023

Tickets are now on sale for the Prevention in Practice Summit 2023, a one-day event focused on bridging the knowledge-to-practice gap in the prevention of mental ill-health.

The summit will bring together leaders in policy, research and practice from across Australia, and feature presentations and panel discussions.

Attendees will have opportunities to contribute to the national priority setting and share best-practice examples.

The summit is being hosted by Everymind, in partnership with members of the Wellbeing and Prevention Coalition in Mental Health, the HMRI Healthy Minds Research Program and Manna Institute.

[LEARN MORE](#)



**Tickets on sale**

## Prevention in Practice Summit 2023

Wednesday, 6 December 2023 | Newcastle, Australia  
(in-person and virtual attendance available)







## Support

Manna Institute is dedicated to addressing the mental health needs of Australians sensitively and respectfully. We appreciate that times of change can be especially challenging.

### For support, contact:

#### Lifeline

13 11 14

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

#### Beyond Blue

1300 22 46 36

[www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support)

#### 13YARN

13 92 76

#### Guyaa Dhuwi

[www.gayaadhuwi.org.au/if-you-need-help/](http://www.gayaadhuwi.org.au/if-you-need-help/)



## Important dates

### October

October webinar **Thursday 5 October**, 12:00PM-1:00PM (AEDT).

### November/December

November webinar **Monday 13 November**, 12:00PM-1:00PM (AEDT).

Manna Institute pre-workshop **Tuesday 7 November**, Albury, NSW.

Rural and Remote Mental Health Symposium 2023, **Wednesday 8–Friday 10 November**, Albury, NSW.

**29 November–1 December**, Society of Mental Health Research (SMHR) 43rd Annual Conference, Perth WA.

## We want to hear from you!

Please share your news of Manna achievements and opportunities via [mannainstitute@une.edu.au](mailto:mannainstitute@une.edu.au)

