



Edition 4 for 2024!

Plexus is the quarterly newsletter of the Spinal Research Institute (SRI). Read on for news updates on SRI's philanthropic program, staff news, program updates, and news for consumers and researchers.

In memory of Alison Beswick

The Spinal Research Institute was deeply saddened to learn of the passing in October of Alison Beswick, Executive Officer of the Marian & EH Flack Trust. Alison was passionate and enthusiastic about the work of the Flack Trust and the charitable causes it aids, including the SRI.



**The Marian &
E.H. Flack Trust**

We first met Alison in 2019. Over the last five years we built a wonderful relationship with Alison. She shared our belief that engaging people with lived experience is vital to the success of research to help improve the quality of life of people with spinal cord injury.

We are incredibly thankful for Alison's support and guidance in facilitating the partnership between the SRI and the Marian & EH Flack Trust to support the SRI's Consumer Engagement Program; and we are so grateful we had the opportunity earlier this year to personally thank Alison and inform her of the positive impact of the Flack Trust's funding.

Alison's encouragement, support and interest in the SRI's programs will always be remembered and sincerely appreciated, and we will miss working with her.

We send our heartfelt condolences to Alison's family and the Trustees of the Marian & EH Flack Trust.

SCI Research Collaboration Grant recipients attend ISCoS 2024!

The SRI was delighted to support eight early career researchers to attend the International Spinal Cord Society's Annual Scientific Meeting in Antwerp, Belgium in September. Over the course of the conference, the grant recipients presented posters, made valuable connections, and strengthened their growing networks. We look forward to hearing more about their progress in spinal cord injury research in the future. [Read more about them.](#)



Left to right: Angela Hanks Philippus, Laura Stendell, Ryan Dorrian, Kanishka Gambhir, Srisankavi Sivasankar, Leena R Chaudhari, Maria Cunha, Natalia Padula

The Patron's Program, together with the support of the Chasam Foundation and Mrs Susan Morgan OAM, have generously supported the SCI Research Collaboration Grants program.

Sharing the SRI's impact at ISCoS

The SRI's Antonio Vecchio (pictured right with Dr Jennifer Coker and Dr Jane Duff) also attended ISCoS this year. In addition to supporting the grant recipients, he presented posters and co-presented a Workshop: *Courage to Love: Strategies for social rehabilitation and romantic engagement post SCI* and an Instructional Course: *Time to embrace digital media in the SCI world: publishing or perishing in the hashtag generation!* Both the workshop and the instructional course were well-received and demonstrate the SRI's leadership and standing in these areas.



The posters below showcase four of the SRI's programs: the Mentor Program, the SCI Writing Prize, SCI Research Collaboration Grants, and the Consumer Engagement Program.

MENTOR PROGRAM DEVELOPING & STRENGTHENING EMERGING SPINAL CORD INJURY RESEARCH TALENT INTERNATIONALLY

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INTRODUCTION
The Spinal Research Institute's (SRI) Mentor Program is now in its fifth year. The program aims to progress the research careers of talented spinal cord injury (SCI) early career researchers. Structured mentoring provides significant benefits to those who participate and equips skills particularly those from developing countries, and with limited access to experienced researchers.

METHODS
Eligibility for mentee participation is assessed through a competitive application process, which requires a well-defined research project, together with clear and realistic objectives for the mentoring relationship. Shortlisted applicants are scored against criteria. Once a mentee is selected for the program, time is taken to find an appropriate mentor who will align with the mentee's research area and career objectives. Baseline and follow-up surveys are conducted to assess satisfaction and progress. Feedback from the surveys is used to refine the mentor program.

RESULTS
Mentees from eight countries have been paired with mentors across the world. 100% of mentees (or surveyed) reported feeling strongly connected with the SCI research field and were confident to progress their research after participating in the mentor program - this is a 40% increase from baseline reporting for connection with the SCI field and confidence to progress research. 100% of mentees surveyed reported that the mentor program had improved their research skills over the 12-24 month period.

CONCLUSION
Applications for the Mentor Program doubled in 2023 indicating that this program is fulfilling a need within the SCI research community. The SRI's mentor program equips researchers with skills that might not be available within their own organisation.

8 countries represented by mentees, paired with mentors across the world

100% of mentees rated their experience as excellent (2022)

100% reported improved research skills

100% reported stronger connection with the SCI research field, leading to increased confidence in progressing their research

MENTEE FEEDBACK
"SRI Mentor Program is excellent. It has encouraged interested researchers from around the world to mentor low middle income country researcher."
(Mentee, 2022)

"I have been supported with deepening my research knowledge and international collaboration by the SRI Mentor Program."
(Mentee, 2024)

"Very impressive. The mentor match has guided the opportunity for me to receive a grant to visit my mentor's institute and further our connection and my research experience."
(Mentee, 2022)

MENTOR PROGRAM AIMS

- CAREER PROGRESSION**: Progress the research careers of talented emerging researchers
- STRONGER PROJECTS**: Provide guidance and support to strengthen the mentees' research projects
- RESEARCH LEADERSHIP**: Produce new leaders in the field to advance spinal cord injury research more broadly
- GLOBAL COLLABORATION**: Enhance international collaborations in spinal cord injury research

The Spinal Research Institute's Mentor Program has benefited from the global collaboration in the field of SCI research. The program is in its 5th year.

MENTOR PROGRAM

Spinal Research Institute

WHY RESEARCH MATTERS: DEMYSTIFYING AND COMMUNICATING SCI RESEARCH

PELEG E, BACKHOUSE C, & HENDRY K
 Spinal Research Institute, Australia

INTRODUCTION
Academic publications can be inaccessible to a non-specialist audience due to journal subscription costs, the use of scientific language, article length, and writing style. In 2020, the Spinal Research Institute (SRI) developed the SCI Research Writing Prize and associated publication, 'Why Research Matters'.

METHOD
The Writing Prize asks SCI researchers and clinicians to write creatively about their research in a way that is suitable for a general audience. Entries must be written in easy-to-understand language. Since 2022, the SRI has offered special consideration to authors whose first language is not English, particularly those from countries with low to very low proficiency. Winners have their piece published in 'Why Research Matters' and receive a place in a research translation and impact workshop, facilitated by Research Impact Academy.

RESULTS
Would researchers enter the competition? The Writing Prize has been undertaken since 2020, and the work of 44 SCI researchers has been featured across four editions of 'Why Research Matters'. The competition has an average of 11 published pieces annually.

Would community members read the publication? In 2023, the social media campaign to publicise 'Why Research Matters' had over 17,000 views. The campaign launch email was opened by 362 individuals and there have been 1,519 events on the writing prize webpage in the past six months.

Would there be benefits we hadn't considered? The SRI's social media platforms experienced growth, leading to improved brand and recognition. Researchers from unrelated fields engaged with the writing prize webpage in the past six months.

CONCLUSION
'Why Research Matters' is a vehicle for research communication. Bringing research into the public domain supports advocacy efforts and improvements to health care policy and practice. Research communication makes research accessible and enables all stakeholders to engage in discussion, debate and decision making about the application of research outcomes. It puts research into the hands of the people who will benefit from its impact, people with SCI.

2020
12 authors
8 countries
2 authors from LMICs
4 authors men
8 authors women

2021
8 authors
5 countries
0 authors from LMICs
3 authors men
5 authors women

2022
13 authors
11 countries
5 authors from LMICs
2 authors men
11 authors women

2023
11 authors
4 countries
5 authors from LMICs
3 authors men
8 authors women

The Spinal Research Institute's SCI Research Writing Prize and associated publication 'Why Research Matters' were launched in 2020. The program is in its 5th year.

WHY RESEARCH MATTERS PRIZE

Spinal Research Institute

IMPACT OF THE SPINAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE'S COLLABORATION GRANTS ON SCI RESEARCH CAREERS OVER 8 YEARS

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BACKGROUND
 The Spinal Research Institute (SRI) has offered annual research collaboration grants to early career researchers since 2015 to attend the International Spinal Cord Society (ISCoS) Annual Scientific Meeting. Meeting with the objective to support them to build strong networks for future collaborative research pathways. The SRI sought to understand the longer term impact to early career researchers from this opportunity.

METHODS
 The Research Collaboration Grants Program invites annual submissions from early career SCI researchers from across the world, with a focus on those from low and middle income economies. Each applicant's research track record, proposed collaborations, intentions of their research to the SCI community were independently scored by reviewers, with grants allocated to the strongest applicants. Criteria assessed included limited access to funding for registration, travel and other related expenses. Feedback on the overall experience and benefits sought from all recipients directly after the conference. In December 2023, the SRI sought longer-term impact feedback via a survey sent to all past recipients from 2015 to 2021 (n=73). 2022 and 2023 recipients (n=28) were not surveyed due to the short time that had elapsed since their conference experience.

CONCLUSION
 The productive exchange of ideas, gaining of new insights, and establishing of new collaborative relationships are examples of how stepping out of the day-to-day work environment can lead to light bulb moments for their research that might not have occurred otherwise.

IMPACT
 SCI early career researchers benefit from the generation of new ideas and the forming of collaborative relationships that are beneficial in the years that follow. "The attendance helped to expand our collaboration horizons beyond the national and regional levels." (Grant Recipient)
 "It helped me to generate ideas for projects that I am currently developing." (Grant Recipient)
 "Most of the information we have learnt at ISCoS has been implemented mainly in our in-patient area." (Grant Recipient)

RESULTS

- 63% have progressed a research or project idea initiated at the conference
- 52% have applied skills and information they learned at the conference into their clinical practice
- 42% said their research has gained wider exposure as a result of conference attendance
- 50% formed collaborative relationships at the ISCoS conference
- 31% have been involved in collaborative research with people that they met at the conference
- 41% made 3-5 new networking connections at the conference and 22% made 6-10 new connections

Respondents described how the opportunity enabled them to make new connections in other countries and connect with researchers in the same field or discipline. Recipients described generating new ideas and directions for their own research and forming ongoing collaborative relationships.

Key messages:

- To be a grant recipient is an honour and a privilege that opens up new opportunities for research and collaboration.
- The highly responsive Board of Trustees that grantee's collaborative relationships can be formed and sustained.
- Conditions to increase the collaboration and grant opportunity.

The Spinal Research Institute has been awarded 63 ISCoS ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC MEETING grants since 2015. The program is in its 9th year. <https://sri.org.au/collaborative-grants>

The Spinal Research Institute is an Australian registered charity building research and knowledge translation lead, spinal research institute, associate professor, Monash University.

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ENABLING CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT IN RESEARCH: A CONSUMER CONSULTANCY SERVICE FOR RESEARCHERS

VECCHIO A & HENDRY K
 Spinal Research Institute, Australia

INTRODUCTION
 The evolving landscape of research increasingly mandates the involvement of consumers beyond their conventional participation roles. This shift is propelled by demands from various stakeholders, including funders, governmental bodies, and consumers, who seek more meaningful engagement within research projects. Such expectations necessitate a departure from traditional methodologies, urging researchers to embrace consumer collaboration. While existing models offer varying degrees of engagement, the unique nature of each research project poses a significant challenge. Researchers have learnt that these predefined frameworks may not fully accommodate the complexities of their projects.

METHOD
 To help researchers navigate the consumer engagement landscape, which is becoming more necessary, a consultancy service was developed and offered on the Spinal Research Institute's (SRI) Spinal Cord Research Hub (SCoRH) platform. The service aims to allow researchers to discuss consumer engagement opportunities on current or future projects. The service encourages researchers to incorporate consumer engagement across all aspects of the research cycle where possible and reasonable. A user-friendly format for the service was developed, allowing users to meet with a consumer engagement consultant twice and receive written feedback on consumer engagement opportunities for the project. The service does not offer opportunities for participant recruitment or any review of protocols, grant submissions or other activities.

CONCLUSION
 Introducing a consultancy service on the SCoRH platform marks a step towards integrating consumer input into research. By offering tailored advice and feedback, this initiative not only supports researchers to navigate the complexities of consumer engagement but also emphasizes the value of such involvement for enriching research outcomes. This movement towards a more inclusive research methodology highlights a significant evolution from traditional practices, fostering an environment where consumer perspectives are not merely included but are integral to the research process. This service's implementation and continued promotion underscores the crucial role of ongoing initiatives in transforming research into a collaborative effort, enhancing its relevance, depth, and societal impact.

RESULTS
 The consultancy service was launched on the SCoRH platform in January 2024 and is available for members to engage with. A social media campaign was used to market the service, which will continue to be advertised and available to all members.

196 articles relating to SCI research in Australia were published between 2018 & 2023, however, only **9** included people with lived experience other than as research participants.

"Consumer involvement in Medical Research Future Fund research is expected. The Medical Research Future Fund encourages researchers to involve consumers at all stages of their proposed research, including its prioritisation, design, conduct, (including to the community), and its translation and evaluation."

Consumer Involvement in Research Funded through the Medical Research Future Fund (August 2024)
 Medical Research Future Fund is the largest source of medical research funding in Australia.

Looking to involve consumers in your research but not sure how? Join SCoRH and access the Consumer Engagement Consultancy Service.

The Spinal Research Institute's Consumer Engagement Program encourages researchers to involve consumers at all stages of their proposed research, including its prioritisation, design, conduct, (including to the community), and its translation and evaluation."

The Spinal Research Institute is an Australian registered charity building research and knowledge translation lead, spinal research institute, associate professor, Monash University.

There are 63 ISCoS ANNUAL SCIENTIFIC MEETING grants since 2015. The program is in its 9th year. <https://sri.org.au/collaborative-grants>

The Landscape of Spinal Cord Injury Research in Australia (2018 - 2023)

On World SCI Day, the Spinal Research Institute (SRI) published its report, *The Landscape of Spinal Cord Injury Research in Australia (2018-2023)*. In order to gain a clear understanding of the current landscape of spinal cord injury research within Australia, the SRI sponsored this mapping study. Having this understanding can inform and support efforts to minimise duplication of research, reduce financial waste, and help make strategic decisions around investment, thereby maximising the use of the limited resources available.

Two approaches were used to identify as much current and recent research as possible. These were: a comprehensive web-based search to identify research currently in progress (commenced during or since 2018), and a scoping literature review to identify recently completed research (literature published between January 2018 and May 2023).

This report identifies several opportunities for new approaches to advance the reach and impact of SCI research in Australia. Models that integrate pre-clinical, clinical and community-based research involving multidisciplinary teams, in consultation with SCI consumers and key stakeholders, could maximise trial

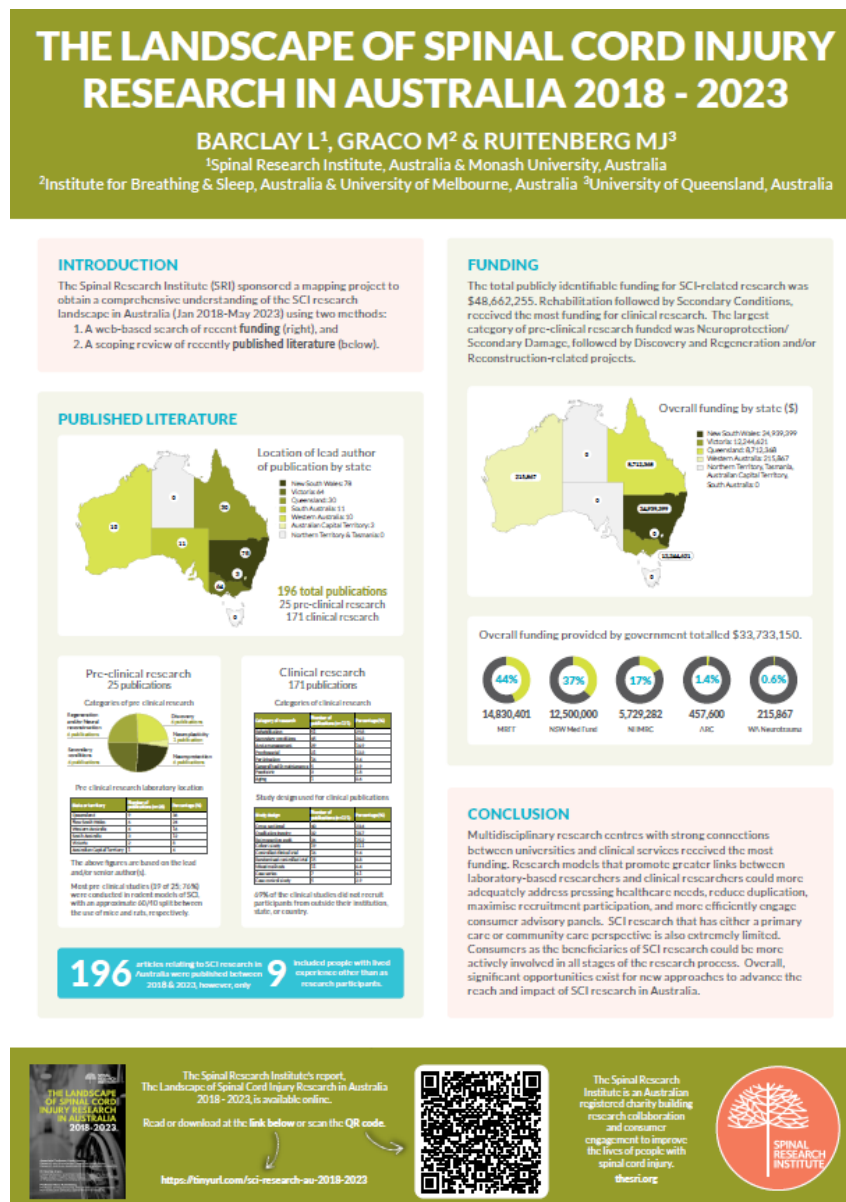


outcomes and return on investment. In addition, stronger incentives for multi-state collaborative projects are needed from funding agencies.

Read the [full report](#).

Sharing the report and its findings

The SRI is pleased to share the report and its findings through a poster presentation at the Australian & New Zealand Spinal Cord Society meeting in Fremantle, Western Australia in late November.



Spinal cord injury research that's making a difference around the world

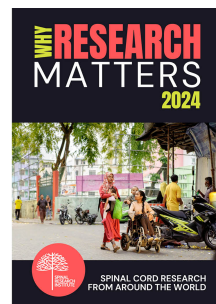
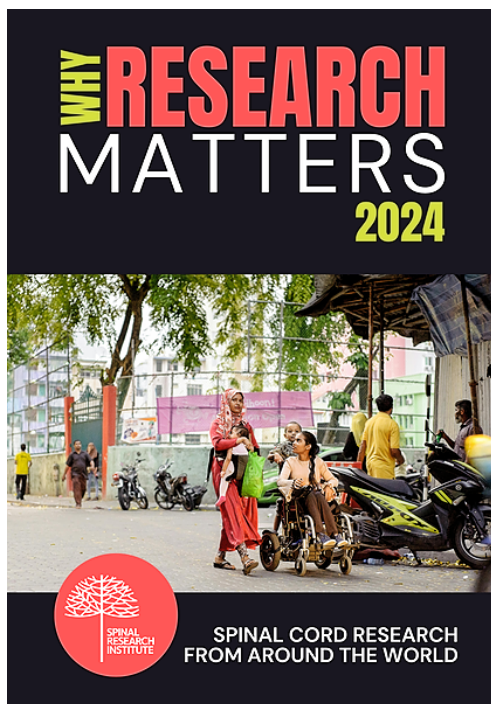
We're very pleased to bring you the 2024 edition of *Why Research Matters*, a collection of spinal cord injury research from around the world. It is a compilation of the top twelve entries from the Spinal Research Institute's 2024 Spinal Cord Injury Research Writing Prize. The entries presented showcase a wide range of

research interest areas and their authors are working in six different countries.

For the first time since we began holding this competition five years ago, the judges' scores were tied, so we have two winners of the Judges' Choice Award! One discusses the impact of technology and specialty nurse counsellors on urological outcomes in SCI patients in India, and the other follows the development of a low-cost manual standing wheelchair.

The objective of this publication is to share and demystify the important work happening around the world in the field of spinal cord injury research. Researchers were asked to present their work for a non-scientific audience in an easy to understand and compelling manner, keeping in mind the question "Why does my research matter?". The Writing Prize was open to all researchers in the field of spinal cord injury, whether their research was published or not.

We hope you enjoy reading this year's edition!



Read about our impact!

Our 2024 Impact Report showcases the many contributions, collaborations, innovations and partnerships that have underpinned our growth and the evolution of our programs.

The SRI's vision is to improve the health and quality of life of people with spinal cord injury. This report highlights the recent outcomes of our work and the impact we are creating to help achieve this goal.

IMPACT REPORT



Spinal Cord Research Hub

Did you know the SRI has an online platform for SCI researchers and clinicians?

If you're a researcher or clinician with an interest in spinal cord injury, are you a member of SCoRH, the SRI's Spinal Cord Research Hub? If not, consider becoming a member today. It is free to join SCoRH, and it is open to researchers and clinicians around the world. With over 450 members, SCoRH provides opportunities for networking and collaboration. It is also home to a number of active research groups across a range of areas. Sign up at scorh.org.

SCoRH Online Networking Event

On November 7, the SRI held the third SCoRH Online Networking Event for 2024. These events assist members to connect with colleagues working in spinal cord injury research around the world in an informal setting. The third event was attended by researchers and clinicians with a range of research interests including rehabilitation, physical health, community living, and mental wellbeing. We will continue to offer these events in 2025.



The Spinal Cord Research Hub is supported by Freemasons Foundation Victoria.

Mentor Program - opportunity to be involved in 2025

The SRI offers a Mentor Program for early career researchers with the aim of improving global collaboration in the field of spinal cord injury (SCI) research. In 2025, we will be putting a call out for new participants in this program. If you are a mid-career or senior researcher and are interested in becoming a mentor, you can find out more at the link below, or [email us](#).



[Read more about the Mentor Program.](#)

SRI Strategy Day

The SRI's [Board and Team](#) recently came together for a strategy review day. It was an opportunity to connect, reflect on our [current strategy](#) and determine areas that matter most for the SRI going forward.

Activities of the day included a review of the key areas of focus and progress over the last 18 months. Strategic questions were discussed and debated, with insights from the day informing the SRI's priorities and focus over the next 18 months.



SRI team update - thank you Linda!

In October we farewelled our Research and Knowledge Translation Lead, Associate Professor Linda Barclay.

Linda led the development of the SRI's recently published report, *The Landscape of Spinal Cord Injury Research in Australia (2018-2023)*. This was a significant project for our organisation, the impact of which will continue as we translate and apply the knowledge gained from the report. Linda also chaired the SRI's Research Working Group, developing internal program guidelines and new program opportunities, including our 2025 plans for a grant to support an Australian-based student undertaking PhD research within the SCI field.



Linda's experience as a researcher, including the application of co-design research methods, provided invaluable knowledge and input that enhanced the SRI's programs.

We thank Linda for her contributions to the SRI and wish her well on her future path.

Are you seeking participants for your research study or clinical trial?

The SRI regularly receives requests to promote research to potential participants for research projects. We now have an [online form](#) where these requests can be submitted for consideration. Studies and trials currently seeking participants are below.

BREATHE: The Spinal cord injury, Mind and HeART (SMART) Study

Researchers seek adults living with #SCI in Sydney to trial a non-invasive therapy that may improve heart & brain function, which in turn may lead to a decrease in blood pressure, sleep problems, brain fog, pain, and fatigue. It may even improve mood!

The SMART trial aims to investigate the effect of a self-regulated slow paced breathing technique in adults with a spinal cord injury. In other populations, this technique has demonstrated promising results, such as reduced pain and depression and improved cognitive function and cardiovascular health. No published study has investigated the effect of this intervention in a population with spinal cord injury. The study is being conducted at Royal North Shore Hospital, St Leonards, Sydney.

[Find out more](#)

The SMART trial

Spinal cord injury, Mind and heART

We are testing a promising new therapy for Adults with Spinal Cord Injury. This non-invasive therapy will likely improve heart and brain function. So, it will possibly lead to improved blood pressure and mood in addition to less cardiac issues, sleep problems, brain fog, pain and fatigue.

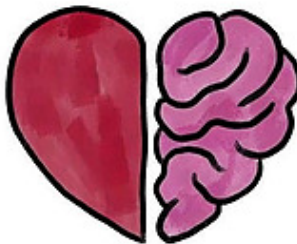
This study is conducted at the **Royal North Shore Hospital** at St Leonards, Sydney.

Are you eligible to participate?

- Are you 18 years or older?
- Have you had your spinal cord injury for longer than 12 months?

What will the therapy involve?

- Breathing exercises and techniques for remaining focused under demanding situations



Time commitments:

- **Assessment:** 4 sessions over 12 months (2.5 hours per session)
- **Therapy:** 10 treatment sessions (4 hours per week, including homework)

You will receive a gift voucher for your time.

If you are interested, please contact us or scan the QR code:

Mob (Jacob): 0420 378 157
Email: smart.trial@sydney.edu.au



Master SMART Trial Advertisement Type A Version 3.0 dated 15 April 2022

Are you an expert on nutrition in spinal cord injury?

The University of Sydney, in collaboration with a team of international researchers are seeking experts to participate in our eDelphi study. They are seeking to establish expert consensus to develop a nutrition dataset for SCI. It is part of the ISCoS dataset development initiative and will help to ensure consistency across studies. This will enable comparison which has the potential to help with standardising practice and care.

Requirements:

- a minimum of 5 years clinical/research experience in spinal cord injury
- at least 2 primary or senior author publications in the field
- English language proficiency

What's involved?

- a 2-3 minute pre-screening survey and a short demographics survey
- a 3-round eDelphi survey

For more information, please email Dr Priya Iyer: priya.iyer@sydney.edu.au.

ARE YOU AN EXPERT ON NUTRITION IN SPINAL CORD INJURY?

To participate or learn more, scan the QR code:



Approved by the University of Sydney Ethics Committee (HREC 2024/HE000939) Version 2, 10.6.24

The University of Sydney, in collaboration with a team of international researchers are seeking experts to participate in our eDelphi study

Do you have:

- clinical/research experience in spinal cord injury (minimum 5 years)?
- at least 2 primary or senior author publications in the field?
- English language proficiency

What's involved?

- a 2-3 min pre-screening survey & a short demographics survey
- a 3-round eDelphi survey

International Spinal Cord Society (ISCoS) update

64th International Spinal Cord Society (ISCoS) Annual Scientific Meeting, 8-11 October 2024

ISCoS is delighted to invite you to ISCoS 2025, the 64th International Spinal Cord



Society Annual Scientific Meeting, combined with the 19th Nordic Spinal Cord Society (NoSCoS) Biennial Meeting, from 8-11 October 2025 in Gothenburg, Sweden.

This annual scientific meeting brings together professionals from across the field of spinal cord injury (SCI) care and research. Whether you're a physiatrist, neurologist, neurosurgeon, trauma specialist, orthopaedic surgeon, urologist, nurse, therapist, or psychologist, this is an opportunity to connect and collaborate with peers who are dedicated to advancing SCI care.

The meeting will include instructional courses, group workshops as well as oral and poster presentations showcasing cutting-edge research, innovative treatments, and advancements in rehabilitation. Each year, experts from various disciplines come together to share and explore the latest developments in spinal cord injury treatment and care. If you work in clinical practice, research, or rehabilitation, this is your chance to delve into new breakthroughs, emerging therapies, and valuable insights that will shape the future of SCI treatment.

More than just a meeting, it's an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions, build professional relationships, and collaborate with others contributing to the future of SCI care.

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The Spinal Research Institute is a not-for-profit organisation building research collaboration and consumer engagement to improve the lives of people with spinal cord injury.

We welcome donations to support our work throughout the year.

Donate

We are registered with the Australian Charity and Not-for-profits Commission.



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Our address is

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1 Yarra Boulevard KEW 3101

info@thesri.org

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The Spinal Research Institute acknowledges
the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work,
the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation.
We pay our respects to Elders past and present.