



MEDIA RELEASE

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SUPERBUG SCIENTISTS WIN GEELONG'S RESEARCHER OF THE YEAR

Geelong's business and scientific communities joined forces on Saturday night to celebrate the region's fifth annual Researcher of the Year Awards.

Held at the Mercure Hotel, more than 120 people gathered to see who shared in a total prize pool of more than \$50,000 in research grants provided by local businesses.

The high spot of the evening was the announcement of the G-Force Recruitment Researcher of the Year, this year awarded to Dr Fred Pfeffer and Dr Luke Henderson of Deakin Waurn Ponds for their pioneering research into new antibiotics that target drug resistant superbugs.

Sue De Gilio, chair of the Smart Geelong Network said that the awards were an exciting precursor to the week-long Geelong Network Research & Innovation Expo calendar.

"For us the Smart Geelong Network has become quite an iconic research and learning expo and I've noticed over the last few years how people have actually started to take a lot more notice of what we are doing. We get a fairly significant number of people turning out during expo week and the awards are outstanding for the high quality researchers we have here," she said.

Ms De Gilio added that it was notable that the awards had attracted a number of international finalists this year.

"The quality of the research is very high, many gaining national and international recognition" she said.

The G-Force Recruitment Researcher of the Year Award was awarded to Deakin lecturer Dr Pfeffer and Alfred Deakin Post-Doctoral Fellow Dr Henderson for their research project that aims to develop alternative antibiotics, made necessary by the rise of anti-biotic resistant superbugs.

The two also won the Shell Refinery Biotechnology Award earlier in the night.

They believe their project outcomes will have "far reaching health benefits in the fight against infectious bacteria".

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Dr Pfeffer, who grew up in Torquay, said that so-called superbugs are becoming common in things as simple as 'swimmers ear', and much of this has been caused by over-use of existing anti-biotics.

"(Superbugs) are actually emerging outside of hospitals, infections that are resistant to treatment," said Dr Pfeffer.

On winning the award Dr Hendeson said: "It's not something you just flick by the wayside. To be recognized in the greater community is excellent. As researchers I think you get stuck in your little world, and you think 'oh we're doing good work', but to see it go out there is pretty cool."

They said that although they are some way off clinical trials they have made good progress in tests leading to the development of a new class or generation of anti-biotics or penicillins.

The BioGeelong Highly Commended Award was presented to Dr Peter Miller and Dr Darren Palmer for their work on a project "dealing with alcohol-related problems and the night-time economy.

Their program of research is a comprehensive investigation into innovative policing and local government and community based interventions that address the management of alcohol and its associated harms within and around licensed venues.

Lawrie Miller, executive director of Geelong Chamber of Commerce, explained that the organizers of the research awards, unique across Australia, have been overwhelmed by its continued success.

"It improves each year," said Mr Miller, "We are staggered by the quality of research that is going on in Geelong.

"We really know that because Geelong is the second highest region for research in Australia. We are very proud of that.

"The way it's going, it's gathering pace. The awards are gathering greater recognition. Smart Geelong Network is leading the way in this.

"We commend all the researchers for putting their applications in. And we'd like to see more applicants."

The Awards Dinner marked the start of the 2009 Smart Geelong Network Research & Innovation Expo.

The expo is a week-long event that showcases the region's research and learning capabilities to the Geelong community and Victoria.

Events take place at cutting edge science and technology establishments such as Deakin Medical School, CSIRO AHL, PathCare and the Marine Discovery Centre.

During the evening guests heard about the remarkable work and life of Melbourne haematologist and researcher Dr Kylie Mason.

Dr Mason outlined the work she has done particularly in the area of childhood cancers - herself a survivor of leukaemia and then revealed that she had recently had to return to hospital to have a brain tumour removed.

The experience, she said, did nothing but fortify her in her work as a Victorian Cancer Agency Clinician Fellow at the Walter Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research.

Afterwards Dr Kylie Mason, a recipient of the Victorian Young Tall Poppy Science Award and the Premier's Award for Public Health and Medical Research, praised the Smart Geelong Network for encouraging research and innovation in the region.

Dr Mason said of the Smart Geelong Network Awards: "I think it's fantastic. It's very hard when you're a scientist to get rewards, you are often stuck in a laboratory for a long time, hidden behind closed doors and you can't see the rewards for your work. It's encouragement to young researchers to go on and make a difference."

The Smart Geelong Network was established by the Geelong Chamber of Commerce and comprises a small group of local agencies committed to profiling and developing research and lifelong learning in the Geelong Region.

Phillipa Challis was a champion and judge of the health and lifestyle category, this her fourth year involved in the awards.

"I was absolutely delighted to see the calibre of entries. It's always been good but this year it was very hard for my judging panel."

Research award category winners on the night were:

CSIRO AAHL Animal Health Award, Dr David Cummins.

Barwon Health: Population, Health and Lifestyle Award, Lana Williams.

Deakin University Early Researcher Award, Sugmar Dharmalingam

Geelong Chamber of Commerce Smart Technology Award, Dr Tong Lin

TAC Safer Communities Award, Dr Darren Palmer

The Gordon Institute of TAFE Teaching and Learning Award, Prof Alister Ward.

City of Greater Geelong Save the Planet Award, Dr Fredrick Ochanda

Shell Refinery: Biotechnology Award, Dr Fred Pfeffer and Dr Luke Henderson

BioGeelong Highly Commended Award, Dr Darren Palmer and Dr Peter Miller.

G-Force Recruitment Researcher of the Year Award, Dr Fred Pfeffer and Dr Luke Henderson.

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For more information please contact Kate Nelson on 5226 7707.