

NDARC

Research Strategy.

2024 – 2027



UNSW
NDARC
National
Drug & Alcohol
Research Centre

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Acknowledgment of Country.

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at UNSW Sydney is located on the Traditional Lands of the Bidjigal Peoples.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's continuing connection to culture, land, sea, waters, and community.

We pay our respects to Elders, both past and present.



Message from the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Health

I am delighted to introduce the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) Strategy 2024–2027. NDARC is foundational within the Faculty of Medicine and Health at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney.

For 38 years, NDARC has been at the forefront of research on alcohol and other drugs. Their unwavering commitment to evidence-based outcomes has significantly influenced national and international responses to substance-related health challenges. NDARC's impactful research directly informs harm reduction strategies.

Our collaboration with NDARC is a source of pride for the Faculty of Medicine and Health. Their multidisciplinary approach, rigorous research excellence, and empathetic decision-making align seamlessly with our mission. Together, we strive to create a healthier future for individuals, families, and communities.

NDARC's work revolves around understanding the lived experiences of alcohol and other drug use. By engaging directly with individuals who have firsthand knowledge, they co-design research and interventions that resonate with real-world contexts. This empathetic approach ensures their work remains relevant, maximising the positive impact and future for individuals, families, and communities.

Professor Cheryl Jones
UNSW Medicine & Health Dean



Message from our Centre Director

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Strategy 2024–2027 reflects our current strengths, areas for development, and future actions. Since our establishment in 1986, NDARC has continually evolved and gained relevance as problematic alcohol and other drug use continues to impact us all. Our vision is a world free from alcohol and other drug-related harms. As vulnerable populations continue to suffer due to known substances—and new ones emerge annually—our work remains essential. NDARC is committed to evidence-based research aimed at improving the lives of affected individuals, families, and communities.

This Strategy results from extensive collaboration and consultation. NDARC staff and students actively contributed ideas and aspirational concepts for future action. In 2023, NDARC hosted an International Review chaired by Dr Mel Miller (Chair of the NDARC Advisory Board).

The panel included senior research and administration leaders from key international and national drug and alcohol research institutions. The Review provided a comprehensive understanding of NDARC's current activities and identified areas for improvement. It also facilitated discussions with key stakeholders inside and outside the University, yielding fruitful insights.

During these conversations, a clear message emerged: NDARC has the potential to enhance research impact in the Asia-Pacific region. Our Strategy outlines leveraging our strengths to support new, vast, and vulnerable populations. Additionally, we recognise the imperative to develop our work supporting First Nations staff, students, and affected communities.

Professor Michael Farrell
NDARC Director

Our Governance



Professor Michael Farrell
Centre Director

Professor Michael Farrell FRCP FRCPsych has been the Director of NDARC since 2011. Before that, he was a Professor of Addiction Psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College London. His extensive research interests include treatment evaluation and national and international drug policy.



Associate Professor Alys Havard
Deputy Director

Dr Alys Havard is an Associate Professor at NDARC and in UNSW Sydney's School of Population Health. She is also Deputy Director of NDARC. She specialises in using big data for alcohol and other drugs research.



Professor Mel Miller
Advisory Board Chair

Professor Mel Miller is Chair of NDARC's Advisory Board and brings decades of experience in the Australian health system, with emphasis on the alcohol and other drug sector. She has vast clinical and organisational psychology expertise and is now a Partner at Deloitte. She remains an Adjunct Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland and a Professor in the Health Group at Griffith University. Professor Miller has been a Member of the Advisory Board for many years but became Chair in 2023.

Our Governance



Scientia Professor Louisa Degenhardt, AO Research Director

Professor Louisa Degenhardt is a UNSW Scientia Professor and NHMRC Investigator (Leadership L3), and Research Director at NDARC. She has honorary Professorial appointments at the University of Melbourne's School of Population and Global Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, and the University of Washington's Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation.



Associate Professor Amy Peacock Deputy Director

Dr Amy Peacock (BA Hons, PhD) is an Associate Professor and Deputy Director of NDARC, and an Adjunct Researcher in the School of Medicine, University of Tasmania. She is a National Health and Medical Research Council Emerging Leadership Fellow.

About

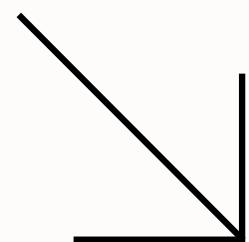
NDARC

Our Story

Our History

Established in 1986 in response to an emerging crisis of heroin use, NDARC has been Australia's leading, internationally renowned research centre for over 35 years. We are at the forefront of national and international evidence-based responses to health challenges related to alcohol and other drugs. Our work saves lives and builds the fabric for the health and well-being of the community.

NDARC was officially opened in 1987 in a political climate influenced by Prime Minister Bob Hawke's personal connection to the nation's drug problem – his daughter had been using heroin. Propelled by his family crisis, Hawke called a special Premier's conference in 1985 to plan a national drug strategy, which led to the launch of the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse and approval of the proposal for a national research centre focussing on treatment and rehabilitation. NDARC began as a research centre of the University of NSW Sydney in 1986 and officially opened on 27th November 1987 following the appointment of its inaugural director, Professor Nick Heather.



Australia's leading research group in the alcohol and other drugs (AOD) sector.



NDARC has shaped national and state policy on social, illicit and prescription drug use, informed the World Health Organisation's guidelines and scheduling for buprenorphine and cannabis and provided evidence for clinical interventions for alcohol, opioids, cannabis, smoking and more. Our research has positively affected thousands of people's lives, families, and communities in Australia and worldwide.

Our research revolves around the lived and living experience of the use of alcohol and other drugs. Coupled with rigorous and innovative research excellence and bolstered by independence of thought, NDARC's approach has been the compass for insightful and empathetic decision-making. We leave no challenge unanswered to achieve tangible, beneficial health outcomes for people, families and communities.

NDARC has shifted the focus away from disease and addiction to a more holistic view of the complex challenges associated with use and associated harms. By marrying research with real-world problems, NDARC generates the highest-quality evidence across an array of fields that directly influence harm reduction in diverse populations. Our multidisciplinary research activities integrate vertically and horizontally across the entire sector, translating into far-reaching and impactful health approaches.

Focusing on Australia and its growing place in the Asia Pacific region, NDARC is locally motivated to achieve global impact.

Our mission

- To be a global leader in research excellence, at the forefront of informing evidence-based policy and practice to reduce alcohol and other drug-related harms.

Our vision

- A world without alcohol and other drug-related harm.

Our values

- A set of core values underpins our goals and activities. Aligned with UNSW behaviours in action, these values continue to elevate NDARC as a nationally and internationally renowned research centre.
- Excellence: We are committed to conducting and disseminating relevant research locally and globally.
- Integrity: We are committed to uncompromising independence in research, evaluation, and advice to remain the compass for the AOD sector, nationally and internationally.
- Innovation: We employ creative thinking to support new and responsive ways of understanding and approaching harm.
- Collaboration: We engage with communities and partners across sectors and the globe to ensure excellence, impact, and reach.
- Diversity: We actively work to oppose stigma and discrimination in research, policy, and practice by employing a diverse research team and integrating lived experience.
- Respect: We centre our work on the well-being of those suffering harm, their families, and their communities.

Research

Strengths

Our impact is guided by the breadth and strength of our research activities.

Research Strengths

01

Epidemiology and emerging trends

Since the 1990s, NDARC's internationally renowned epidemiological research quantifies and characterises alcohol and other drug use and harms in Australia and identifies emerging trends to provide a framework for policy responses and interventions that improve health and wellbeing. Our epidemiological work positions NDARC as a compass for health responses. The cornerstone of our program is the world-leading Drug Trends monitoring system.

02

Prevention and early intervention

Our research on early intervention programs aims to identify, develop, and evaluate effective strategies to prevent alcohol and other drug-related harms. Our researchers collaborate with stakeholders across the sector to share knowledge and address current and emerging issues.

03

Mental and physical comorbidities

Our research identifies and understands mental and physical comorbidities impacting people who use alcohol and other drugs, driving evidence-based recommendations to advance screening, detection, interventions, and implementation of effective and efficient treatment services.

04

Treatment and harm reduction

Collaborating with clinicians and academics worldwide, NDARC's treatment and harm reduction research enables optimal clinical practice and improves health outcomes. We are committed to developing new and innovative responses to reduce alcohol, tobacco and other drug problems and evaluating existing programs in real-world settings and specific populations.

Research Strengths

05

Drug policy

Our research evaluates policy in law, policing, harm reduction, prevention, and treatment. Drawing on expertise across various disciplines (e.g., criminology, drug and alcohol policy, health, and social policy), our research identifies responses that can reduce drug-related harms and build evidence to support a better understanding of illicit drug markets and drug-related costs.

06

Criminal justice system

Our program encompasses research on the health of people in contact with the criminal justice system, considering opportunities for therapeutic outcomes in these settings and responses that can reduce drug-related harms. We provide research evidence to support integrated law enforcement, health, and social policy and evidence to support improved treatment retention rates.

07

Priority populations

We partner with key population groups to ensure our research extends across and addresses the needs of diverse and priority populations. Through this work, we aim to understand better alcohol and other drug use and harms among these groups and identify tailored approaches to enhance health and wellbeing.

08

Big data and new technologies

We use large-scale data and new technologies to support research across all our activity areas. Through routinely collected data spanning vital statistics, health service use, health registries, social services use and criminal justice system contacts, we access multiple data collections linked at the person level to provide the most accurate picture of use and harms.

Strategic Goals

Since its inception, NDARC's impact and integrity has been founded on a world-leading, rigorous, and systematic approach to achieve research excellence. This is guided by a set of core strategic goals.

01

Characterise the nature and extent of alcohol and other drug use and the determinants of their related harms.



Priority actions

- Conduct high quality research to document the epidemiology of alcohol and other drug use, including new and emerging drug trends
- Conduct high-quality research to quantify and qualify the extent and determinants of harms from alcohol and other drug use and who they affect
- Use a multi-disciplinary approach to research and partnerships at all levels of the sector to identify determinants of harm and their impacts
- Seek local and international research alliances with people who have lived and living experience, community organisations, and clinicians
- Expand research alliances drawing on emerging data sources, linkages and cohorts nationally and internationally
- Expand research alliances with other university departments, centres of excellence, peak bodies, NGOs and government health departments

02

Generate evidence to shape optimum and effective responses to harms.

Priority actions

- Conduct world-leading studies of new interventions to reduce alcohol and other drug harm, including clinical trials, qualitative and mixed-method approaches
- Carry out independent evaluations of existing interventions to reduce alcohol and other drug-related harm
- Seek innovative and diverse research methods to understand determinants of risk without being biased by stigma
- Embed pathways for health outcomes through collaborative design of research with stakeholders, including NGOs, policymakers, clinicians and allied health providers
- Seek strategic collaborations to assist in targeting comorbidities associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs

03

Translate evidence into policy and practice.

Priority actions

- Formalise patterns of engagement with key local, state, national, and international stakeholders to ensure direct and wide-ranging impact in policy and practice
- Provide research mentorship reciprocal learning opportunities, and build alliances with health services and clinicians to embed research and evaluation into health systems and routine clinical practice, and support buy-in from those most likely to implement and benefit from the evidence
- Develop relevant and broad-reaching knowledge dissemination practices for policymakers, clinicians, academics, relevant community groups and people who use drugs
- Build strong alliances with diverse populations and people with lived and living experience for effective, culturally relevant, and targeted pathways towards health outcomes
- Engage with clinicians and health service providers to share information on research evidence, offer training on best practice, and disseminate research evidence to foster innovations in clinical practice via face-to-face workshops, online webinars, and knowledge exchange
- Work actively with researchers and media to promote knowledge dissemination of innovations and best evidence in policy and practice
- Use our website, social media, and other education and information resources (fact sheets, reports, newsletters, webinars, annual symposiums) to build networks for research and health outcomes
- Engage with new technologies, including artificial intelligence, in data collection, knowledge translation, and outputs

04

Evaluate policy and practice at all levels of the alcohol and other drugs sector.



Priority actions

- Build strategic national and international research alliances with those from key relevant disciplines (e.g., health economics, legal, and policy) to broaden the scope of evaluation
- Employ a range of research methodologies to ensure accuracy, excellence, depth, and reach of data collection
- Orientate evaluation toward establishing the best health outcomes and harm minimisation for people who use alcohol and other drugs
- Employ methods and approaches to minimise bias, stigma, and discrimination in evaluation

05

BUILD internal capacity for responsive and innovative research at all levels of the alcohol and other drugs sector.



Priority actions

- Convene high-performing research teams to lead high-quality research
- Build national and international research partnerships to expand the scope of research and its impact
- Recruit, develop and retain high-calibre senior research staff to lead programs of research
- Recruit, develop and retain early to mid-career researchers to build research leadership and their own programs of research
- Recruit and train higher-degree research students to develop strong research skills and conduct high-quality work
- Promote multidisciplinary appointments and collaborations, and build alliances and networks to ensure the scope, reach, and adaptability of research activity to emerging trends in alcohol and other drug use and harms
- Ensure diverse research staff at all levels, including people with lived and living experience, to build the scope of research possibilities, including prioritising research positions for First Nations people

06

INTEGRATE NDARC as a leader in education and career pathways.



Priority actions

- Continue to develop our Higher Degree Research Program to enable students to enter the alcohol and other drugs field of study under the supervision and support of NDARC research leaders
- Develop our early career researchers, including those in our Postdoctoral Research Fellow program, including mentoring and support to enable emerging academics to define their area of research interest, build national and international networks, learn presentation skills, and achieve grant application success
- Provide mid-career researchers with a range of professional development and career pathways, including participation on internal and external research boards and committees and other decision-making opportunities, endowed research fellows, and integrated opportunities in the broader sector
- Promote clinical and allied health research alliances to foster deeper connections throughout the sector
- Promote teaching and knowledge exchange opportunities for incumbent research staff and students

07

ENGAGE with community and people with lived and living experience.



Priority actions

- Engage with community groups to provide information sharing and opportunities for collaborations via higher degree research and/or employment at NDARC
- Engage with communities to facilitate great alignment of NDARC research with community health needs
- Build community and lived and living experience into research design to promote culturally sensitive and effective pathways to health interventions and outcomes, with priority focus on closing the gap in scope of research and health outcomes for First Nations people in Australia
- Build effective communication and knowledge translation strategies to ensure evidence is translated into best policy and practice at a community and individual level

Operations & Collaborations

Operations & Collaborations

Our infrastructure, hosted within UNSW, provides workplace systems, hardware, and software to support research and operational excellence in the workplace and remotely. We benefit from UNSW's central provision of HR, Finance, and Legal Services.

In addition, our researchers are funded through successful applications to the Department of Health and Aged Care, NHMRC, ARC, MRFF, NIH, industry partners, philanthropic donors, and other public and private sector funding agencies, nationally and internationally.

As a multidisciplinary, collaborative research centre, we currently employ approximately one hundred staff members from various disciplines in medicine, science, and the social sciences. We pride ourselves on an inclusive and diverse workforce. We support and appreciate our peer workforce of lived and living experience representatives and colleagues. This gives NDARC's research authentic reach and scope.

NDARC has a strong cohort of research students with higher degrees. As part of our capacity building in the alcohol and other drug sector, we have a strong program of postgraduate study, supported by researcher supervision and mentoring by senior staff, including scholarship opportunities. Following this, we provide postdoctoral research fellowships further to develop the capacity of our recently graduated students and provide the opportunity for junior researchers to engage broadly across the Centre and develop their own stream of research or job opportunities in the sector. NDARC provides strong support for staff professional development and capacity building.

Operations & Collaborations

Within UNSW Sydney, the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre demonstrates alignment with the Faculty of Medicine and Health's "Health 25 Strategy", and UNSW's strategic priorities of academic excellence, staff and student capacity building, innovation, and engagement.

As Australia's leading national drug and alcohol research centre, our research activities provide an evidence base for the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care National Drug Strategy. NDARC is highly regarded nationally and internationally, allowing staff and students to engage in research and work closely with collaborators across Australia and the world.

NDARC is the host partner for the National Centre for Clinical Research on Emerging Drugs (NCCRED), a consortium with The National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA, Flinders University), the National Drug Research Institute (NDRI, Curtin University), and St Vincent's Health Australia. This collaboration aims to build the capacity and scope for new clinical research into emerging drugs and rapidly translate these findings into best clinical practice.

Our Key Collaborators

Our Key Collaborators

- Australian Government departments and agencies at national and jurisdictional level
- UNSW Faculty of Medicine, in particular the Neuroscience, Mental Health and Addiction Theme, The Kirby Institute, Centre for Big Data Research in Health, School of Population Health and School of Psychiatry
- Other UNSW-sponsored initiatives such as the Mindgardens Neuroscience Network, UNSW Futures Institutes, PLoS Alliance and Grand Challenges, and research partners in other UNSW faculties
- Research partners at Australian and international universities, clinical facilities, and medical research institutes
- Community organisations representing the interests of those most affected by the diseases under investigation
- Clinicians, including specialists, general practitioners, nurses, and other health professionals
- International collaborators in Government, organisations (WHO and UN), and major universities

Future focus

Future focus



- Through continued research excellence and extensive alliances, position NDARC as a leader in national and jurisdictional policy and strategy
- Extend NDARC's international reach through strategic government and international collaborations to lead research in burdens of disease and innovations in therapeutic interventions and influence world health guidelines and practices
- Lead strategic research alliances with an increasing focus on Asia Pacific region
- Build stronger knowledge and research exchanges with clinical and allied health practitioners and shared care models of Primary Care to improve the delivery of health measures and interventions
- Continue to improve pathways and frameworks for knowledge and evidence translation of NDARC's world-leading academic publication record into local, national, and international policy and practice.
- Build research capacity and collaboration with community groups at the level of research design and rollout to ensure benefits for people with lived and living experience
- Utilise innovations in technology, including AI, to improve all aspects of how we conduct, share and translate research
- Prioritise research alliances with a focus on justice health to position NDARC as a leader in policy and ethical discussions in the alcohol and other drugs sector
- Take active steps to close gaps in culturally relevant research that makes meaningful impact on the disparities in health outcomes for key populations, and particularly First Nations people in Australia

Into
2025

Into 2025

In 2025, NDARC will move into the UNSW Health Translation Hub of the Randwick Health and Innovation Precinct (Sydney, NSW). This state-of-the-art health complex provides NDARC with further opportunities to engage closely with medical researchers, clinicians, academics, industry partners, and public health officials working within the neuroscience, mental health, and addiction fields. This proximity will support the rapid translation of our research, education, and collaborative work into improved policy and practice, delivering better health outcomes to our communities.

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