



Wales Autism Research Centre: Five Year Plan 2009-2014

Mission

“Advancing scientific understanding of autism to create positive change”

The mission of the Wales Autism Research Centre is to advance scientific understanding and thereby create positive change and outcomes for individuals and families affected by autism. This mission is to be achieved by (a) facilitating new research in key areas of identification, diagnosis, developmental processes and intervention and (b) integrating scientific evidence with policy and practice. This distinctive double goal is supported by partnerships between scientists, practitioners and government policy makers, making the purpose of this research centre unique in the UK.

The next 5 years:

The vision is that by 2015, the Centre’s mission will have begun to be realised and experienced by families in Wales as a direct result of partnership work with the Welsh Assembly Government and the charities. By this time, the Centre and its activities will be embedded into the local and national community with a strongly developing track record of translating research into practice and policy. Although traditionally, research progress into causes of autism and interventions has tended to be slow, the plan is that in five years’ time the integrated and interdisciplinary research conducted by the Centre will be starting to advance understanding of factors that affect the onset, and outcome of autism symptoms in childhood and adulthood. It is expected that the Centre will have an excellent international reputation for its research in psychological and biomedical research in autism and related conditions, with a developing reputation as a training centre for PhD and postdoctoral scientists as well as for its translational work in policy and practice. It therefore should provide a model of excellence for research centres in other countries. Looking ahead further, ten years hence, we should expect to see research findings being translated into improvements in detection and intervention effectiveness.

In the shorter term, in September 2010, the Wales Autism Research Centre will be formally launched, with a website launch in April 2010. Staff capacity will increase with appointments made of four new Research Associates, one of whom will make a long term contribution to the development of the centre, and continue to build research, training and translation activities in line with our four objectives (see below). In the coming year the infrastructure of the centre will be expanded through the establishment of laboratories for testing children (observation lab) and adults with ASD (eye-tracking). Together with the facilities at Cardiff University Brain Imaging Centre (CUBRIC), these labs this will create the basis for excellent

assessment facilities and testing arrangements for visiting families and individuals participating in research.

Five year Plan: 2009-2014

Objectives

The following four objectives guide the work of the Wales Centre for Autism Research.

1. to conduct internationally competitive scientific research projects
2. to facilitate interdisciplinary research and research networks
3. to develop research and training that supports and influences practice and policy
4. to improve public and professional awareness of research

1. Conducting internationally competitive scientific research projects

The Centre's mission will rely on the production of innovative, high quality research awards and publications. International excellence in university research is judged by the award of externally funded research grants and publication in international scientific journals that have the highest impact factor ratings and citations. Research projects funded from research councils such as Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Medical Research Council (MRC) as well as from charities, are highly competitive with rigorous levels of appraisal and successful projects provide indicators of the highest quality research. In order for research results to gain the highest recognition, reputation and citation within the international scientific community, it is important to publish work in top-quality scientific journals and to disseminate it at international conferences and meetings.

Planned activities: 2009-2014

- New research council grants applied for
- Success in funding applications
- Publication in high quality journals
- International conference presentations and invited talks
- Databases and measures developed

2. Facilitating interdisciplinary research and research networks

The second objective for the Wales Autism Research Centre is to facilitate interdisciplinary research and research networks. As autism spectrum disorders are increasingly recognised as complex, developing conditions that overlap with other clinical syndromes and the typical population, an interdisciplinary perspective is increasingly needed. Advancement of knowledge in autism research relies on cooperation rather than competition and the sharing of knowledge across networks of expertise. However, because researchers who work in disciplines outside the field of autism do not share either background training or expertise in autism, achieving common ground can be difficult. Likewise, although expertise in autism research is extremely strong in the UK, researchers working within the same discipline and country are often competing for funding sources and research can proceed in a vacuum

unless active attempts made to create networks. A key priority will be to promote communication and a strong collaborative ethos.

Planned activities 2009-2014

- The development of Cardiff Autism Research Group seminars and visits to the Centre by international research visitors
- Joint activities and meetings with the Neuroscience and Mental Health Research Institute.
- Contributing to the development of collaborative research and training networks in Wales, UK and internationally.
- Contribution to planning for international conference (2011) organised by Autism Cymru

3. Developing research and training that supports and influences practice and policy

The objective of developing research and training to specifically support and influence practice and government policy is a unique opportunity, and makes the Wales Autism Research Centre distinctive in its goals amongst research centres for autism. The Welsh Assembly Government's ASD Action Plan was designed before Prof Leekam's arrival and WARC has been able to respond to the ASD Action Plan and support and inform this implementation processes in advisory and project work. Another priority will be to further the aim of improving the influence of research knowledge in ASD on future policy making and practice. This goal will be addressed by increasing opportunities for dialogue between researchers and policy makers/practitioners, creating improvements in the mechanisms for translation of scientific evidence into policy and practice, and aiming to improve measurable outcomes of policy and practice that are informed by research

Planned activities 2009-2014

- Evidence and reports to Welsh Assembly Government on diagnostic and intervention services
- Meetings or university exchanges with Welsh Assembly Members, government staff and practitioners
- Training: materials for use by non-academics (e.g. in education services) and student training in practice and policy.
- Improved measurable outcome/impact of research on policy and practice
- Undergraduate Applied student training experience with ASD Action Plan Regional

4. Improving public and professional awareness of research.

Despite increased awareness of autism spectrum disorders by the general public due to greater media attention, the lack of depth of understanding by the lay public is very striking. Similarly, because so many professionals come into contact with people with ASD, all of whom have different training backgrounds, there is little consistency in the understanding

held by different professionals and communication of information is patchy. A lack of consistent guidance may be confusing for parents who will then access a range of information sources on the internet, many of which do not give accurate information. A priority is to contribute to the awareness raising goals of the government ASD action plan and make the work of WARC visible and accessible to the public. Most important however is to improve public understanding of scientific research in autism by promoting 'research awareness'.

Planned activities 2009-2014

- Develop materials to promote the Centre and our research to the public, professional groups and media.
- Use the latest bibliographic linking tools and search engine facilities to maximise impact of publications
- Provide events targeting public and professional awareness of autism scientific research in autism and monitor outcomes
- Develop a communications strategy in collaboration with other agencies; e.g. AWARES, Autism Cymru.