

Invergowrie 20th Anniversary Celebration

Monday 26th March, 2012.

Dr Rony Duncan

A close friend of mine is a Primary School Teacher and for the past few years she's been teaching Prep. She often has me in hysterics relaying stories about things her students have shared with her, and the latest was just a few weeks ago.

One afternoon as her preps were sitting around her on the floor, waiting for the bell to ring to go home, she told them that she had a surprise for them the next day. Of course, they wanted to know what it was, but she explained that if she told them, it wouldn't be a surprise anymore. One eager little girl said to her "I know how to find out! I'm going to find out tonight at home!"

The next morning this same girl raced up to my friend, her teacher, and said "Miss Stott, Miss Stott! I couldn't find out what your surprise was! I put it into Google... but nothing came up!"

This was extraordinary to me! Nothing could have conveyed more clearly the place of modern technology in young people's lives, or the beliefs they hold about the internet being the answer to everything!

I sometimes wonder if parents hold similar views about their parental role; wanting to be the answer to all their children's needs. Perhaps with young children this is possible. But as children grow into adolescents, it's not possible for parents to be the answer to all their teenager's needs. The circle of support – and influence – must widen. Of course, this is not an easy or simple transition. And it is this transition – the gradual shift in roles and responsibilities that occurs during adolescence - that has driven much of my current research.

When I began my Science Degree, over 10 years ago, I had no idea I'd end up working in the field of adolescent health – it was actually the field of ethics that first grabbed my attention, and led me into adolescent health.

During my Science Degree, I spent a lot of time studying genetics, but instead of wanting to end up in a laboratory conducting experiments, it was the ethical implications of genetic technology that captured my attention most. I wanted to know whether we *should* let parents choose the gender of their children, not whether we *could*. And I also wanted to know why there was such heated debate about the idea of adolescents having genetic tests for diseases they might develop in adulthood.

In fact, I was so interested in adolescents having genetic tests that I went on to do my Honours year and a PhD looking at that topic. And it was through my interviews with young people who'd been tested for Huntington Disease that my real passion around Adolescent Health was sparked.

I've now been at the Centre for Adolescent Health for over 5 years and during this time my research has focussed on topics at the intersection of ethics and adolescent health. At the moment I'm researching the topic of confidentiality for adolescents, which, as I'm sure you can imagine, is intimately linked with parental views about their roles and responsibilities in their children's lives.

Previous research tells us some important things about confidentiality. When young people are given an assurance about confidentiality in the medical setting, they are more likely to seek medical care, more likely to disclose sensitive information, and more likely to return for future visits. And my research looks at the views of parents about confidentiality for adolescents.

So far, we've collected some fascinating results. Parents are generally in favour of confidentiality for adolescents. They understand that it's important and they agree it should be supported in clinical settings. But... when it comes to their own children, they actually believe that the Dr should inform them about a wide range of topics, even if their child does not want them to know.

The majority of parents want to be told if their teenager is experiencing a mental health issue or using illicit drugs. You might agree with this. But 40% of parents want to know if their teenager is sexually active. 55% of parents want to know if their teenager is drinking alcohol. And 37% of parents want to know if their teenager is smoking cigarettes.

The problem is, if doctor's told parents about all of these facts, the consultation would no longer be confidential and young people would stop sharing these parts of their lives or, worse still, stop seeking health care all together.

We've already had a great deal of interest in this research – including a recent Editorial that was written in the International Journal of Adolescent Health, highlighting our most recent paper.

And there's one very important thing that I also want you to know about this research... It would not have been possible without the Invergowrie Foundation. The Foundation has provided the critical bridge funding I required to get me through my current gap between larger Government grants. And I am extremely grateful to them for doing so.

So, I'd like to take this opportunity to personally thank all of those involved with the Foundation for their support of me and for their support of the Centre for Adolescent Health. Not only have they been providing fellowships to women at the Centre for 6 years now, but they also fund a spectacular Adolescent-Health Rural-Linkage Program, which has been running since 2006, and has trained 50 women from all over Victoria in adolescent health.

I certainly feel incredibly lucky to be part of this wonderful and ongoing collaboration. And I hope to have another opportunity in the future to share with you not only funny stories from my friend the Primary School teacher, but also the research successes we have in adolescent health.

Thank you.