



COMMONWEALTH NEWS

RCS Newsletter Spring 2020

Patron: H.E. General the Hon. David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) Governor-General of Australia

LONDON RCS ASKS FOR BRANCH ACTION ON FOUR KEY AREAS OF NEED

London RCS has asked the Society's branches world-wide to take the initiative in their regional areas to take action where need has been identified in Communities, Literacy, Equality and the Environment.

This follows a review of the RCS International Network to identify the best way to support the Society's shared vision of improving the lives and prospects of all Commonwealth citizens.

The selection of new Regional and Youth Coordinators for each of the five major regions of the Commonwealth—Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific—is currently under way, following an invitation to

all RCS branches in late August to encourage interest from their membership for these roles as well as volunteers to serve on the Selection Committee. Applications to serve as Working Group Leads i.e. to head one of the four areas of need identified by RCS London's review, were also called for.

Although there are five 'official' regions of the Commonwealth, there will be seven Regional Coordinators in order to identify Australia as a region separate from the Pacific region and to give individual identities to Canada and The Caribbean in the 'American' region.

By November, if all goes according to plan, each

region will have selected its Working Group Leads, and, from this group, one Lead to work with the RCS Networks Officer in London.

Appointments

Current Regional Coordinators will be stood down on October 30 and cannot reapply. The same rule applies to Regional Youth Coordinators. The period of appointment in both cases will be for two years. The current Regional Coordinator for Australia is Ms Libby Ellis, South Australian RCS Branch President. Mr Jack Milne, a Council member of the ACT Branch, is the current Youth Coordinator.

The main link with London for each region will be the Regional Coordinator who will have monthly engagement with the Society's Networks officer, bi-monthly engagement with Working Group Leads and quarterly engagement with RCS branches in their region. The person filling this role will also be required to make available the Society's promotional materials, notices and events to all branches in the region. They will also be tasked with re-engaging dormant RCS branches and encouraging the establishment of new branches.

LITERACY WEEK CELEBRATED IN PAPUA-NEW GUINEA



Happy children at Pari Elementary School's new Library Learning Centre in Port Moresby, built by the Canberra-based charity, Buk bilong Picinini, and opened during Literacy Week in September. With the children are (l to r) Leanne Resson, Executive Officer, Buk bilong Picinini, Rupert Bray, COO, Steamships Ltd—one of the charity's long-term donor partners—and Dadi Toka, Deputy Governor of the NCD and Chairman of the Motu Koita Assembly. (See story p.3)

RCS MONTGOMERIE AWARD RESEARCH ON INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT DEMENTIA

When Mitchell McMaster, winner of the RCS ACT Branch 2017 Phyllis Montgomerie Award, set out to investigate the impact of lifestyle factors in dementia, he was aware that obesity, poor diet, physical and cognitive inactivity are implicated in 30 to 50 per cent of Alzheimer's Disease. What he wanted to test was whether lifestyle changes could lower the risk of dementia, generally, in people already experiencing cognitive decline or mild impairment.

The study that Mitchell McMaster carried out as part of his PhD project at the Australian National University involved modifying the lifestyles of a group of people over the age of 65 who were suffering from cognitive decline or mild cognitive impairment to see if the decline into dementia could be prevented.



Mitchell McMaster

The 119 volunteers were randomly assigned to a Control group or an Intervention group. Both groups completed educational modules on dementia and cognitive decline, a Mediterranean diet, physical activity and cognitive engagement,

and were asked to implement what they had learned into their own lifestyle. The difference, however, was that people in the Intervention group were also given sessions with a dietician, an exercise physiologist to create an exercise plan, and online brain training.

The funds from the Montgomerie Award were used to pay for sessions with specialists in these areas.

Before the study began, both groups underwent cognitive testing and information was gathered about participants' lifestyles. Testing was repeated immediately after the intervention and at three and six-month follow-ups.

The results showed that people in the Control group were not able to make any significant change to their lifestyles. There had also been no improvement in their cognitive skills over the period of the study.

In contrast, people in the Intervention group that received assistance to make changes in their lifestyle showed significantly higher scores in their cognition at both follow-up time points. Mitchell writes:

'Our interpretation of the findings was that during the cognitive decline period, the brain retains sufficient neuroplasticity, that, given the right intervention, it can 'bounce back' from cognitive decline.'

He believes that this 'proof-of-concept' study provides sufficient evidence to pursue funding for a longer, larger study to confirm that improving the life-

style of people experiencing cognitive decline results in long-term benefits and lower rates of dementia.

Mitchell has now published two of four planned *research articles that he has made available to our RCS ACT Branch. One of these articles, in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* in September 2020 received widespread coverage in Australian media.

In a message to our Branch that accompanied a report on his research, Mitchell expressed his thanks to the family of Phyllis Montgomerie and the RCS for their contribution to the project through the Award. He expects to finish his PhD studies later this year.

NOTE: The 'Award' referred to in this report was named for Mrs Phyllis Montgomerie, a former President and Life Member of the RCS ACT Branch who died in 2011. Mrs Montgomerie left the Branch a bequest to be used for 'education and research'.

The RCS ACT Branch Council has decided not to proceed with the 2021 Award due to current travel restrictions affecting many research projects. The Award is given to 'support' research which in the past, has often been used for travel associated with research.

**If any reader of Commonwealth News would like to receive a copy of one or both of these journal articles, please email rcsact@bigpond.com Ed.*

RCS SUPPORT FOR BUK BILONG PICININI

Donations from RCS members made it possible to present a cheque for \$400 to the Canberra-based charity, Buk bilong Picinini in September.

The charity was founded by Anne-Sophie Hermann, Chair and Canberra Office Director in 2007, when on a posting to Papua New-Guinea with her husband, Chris Moraitis, the Australian High Commissioner.

At that time, PNG had a collapsed library system and no books for vulnerable children to read and learn from. Anne-Sophie got together a group of volunteers which sought support from businesses to establish Library Learning Centres.

Across the country today, the Centres have 1200 5-year-olds enrolled in an Early Childhood Development Program while older children attend an After-School Literacy Support Program. A digital learning system for teachers and children is about to start. One year ago, the charity celebrated having brought one million high quality children's books to PNG. To find out more visit: www.bukbilongpicinini.org

MEMORY OF 'STARING DOWN ZIMBABWE'

Trying to convince Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe that there was 'a better way of doing things', is one of the enduring memories that Donald McKinnon has of his period as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Secretariat from 2000 to 2008.

In an interview recorded in August 2020, Sir Donald describes it as 'Staring down Zimbabwe ... a time-consuming issue over a long time', with President Mugabe, irked by Commonwealth scrutiny and suspended from membership in 2002, quitting altogether in 2003. At the time, Mugabe's violent land seizures of formerly productive farms had resulted in widespread famine, general repression of the population and the arrest and torture of opposition MPs.

Sir Donald also reflected on 'the soft power' of a Secretary-General, relations with the Royal Family, and the need for the Commonwealth and multilateralism in a post-COVID world.

The filmed interview with Sir Donald —speaking from his home in New Zealand—is one of four arranged by the Commonwealth Round Table *Journal of International Affairs* with surviving former Secretaries-General during the COVID restrictions in London. The others interviewed are Sir Shridath 'Sonny' Ramphal (1975-1990) in Barbados, Chief Emeka Anyaoku (1990-2000) in Nigeria and Kamallesh Sharma (2008-2016) in India.

All ranging in age between 78 and 91, these 'venerable gentlemen ... readily and graciously agreed to our request', according to *Round Table Journal* editor Venkat Iyer, who saw it as 'an exercise in public education about the history and evolution of the Commonwealth'.

The initial idea to look at the contemporary Commonwealth through the eyes of its former Secretaries-General came from Nicholas Watts of the Independent Forum of Commonwealth organisations (IFCO) during a conversation with Venkat Iyer, to whom, the latter says, the Round Table 'owes a debt of gratitude'.

The interviews, on *Zoom*, were conducted at short notice over two days in August by Rita Payne, a former Asia Editor of BBC World TV, who is also a member of the Round Table's editorial board.

The interviews can be watched on the Round Table's **YouTube** channel accessible through its website: www.commonwealthroundtable.co.uk

**Zimbabwe, under its current president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has applied to re-join the Commonwealth.*

The RCS ACT Branch Newsletter *Commonwealth News* is published four times a year. Letters and contributions are welcome. Contact: Maureen Hickman, Editor, at maureen.hickman@bigpond.com

SPRING LUNCH IN CANBERRA



Mr Robert Campbell and Mrs Helen Campbell (seated) and Mrs Audrey Wilson were among guests at the Spring lunch jointly hosted by the RCS ACT Branch and the Australia-Britain Society at the Royal Canberra Golf Club in September. This was the first social gathering for both societies since the easing of COVID restrictions that began in the ACT in March.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

RCS Branch Christmas Drinks

The President, Maureen Hickman, will host Christmas Drinks on

Sunday 13 December

4 to 6 pm

at

Shackleton Park

Unit 6, 72 Shackleton Circuit, Mawson

Acceptances by email to maureen.hickman@bigpond.com by **Monday 7 December**

In the spirit of Christmas, please bring a small gift for the Salvo's Christmas Appeal.

Parking: Advice on parking will be provided by return email. No. 6 is inside the complex, not on the street.

NEW MEMBERS

The RCS ACT Branch warmly welcomes new members Mr Lachlan Marshall, Mr Peter Stagg, Mr Clifford To and Professor Robert Whittaker.

VALETE

The President and Council of the RCS ACT Branch extend their sincere condolences to the families and friends of three of our members: **Air Marshall David Evans**, who died in September at the age of 95; **Ms Raewyn Bastian**, who died in August, was prominent in community affairs in the Canberra region; and **Commander David Clinch**, an active member of the Branch for many years, who died in October.