

Report of the survey of members of the Australasian Society for Psychiatric Research

August 2000

At the 1999 annual scientific meeting of the Australasian Society for Psychiatric Research (ASPR), the idea of a survey of the society's membership was mooted as a means of identifying services that were important to members. In this way, ASPR would be better equipped to identify areas for future development. A questionnaire was constructed and, in March 2000, it was sent out to ASPR members in the body of an e-mail message for ease of retrieval, response and return. The responses were entered into an SPSS database and analysed. This report summarises the findings.

Profile of members

Completed responses were received from 64 of the 160 ASPR members surveyed, a response rate of 40.0%. The majority of respondents were resident in Australia (87.5%); the remainder were New Zealand members. All but one were current members of ASPR. The median number of years of membership was 6 (ranging from one year or less to 22 years which is the length of time that ASPR has been in existence). The percentage who had been members for five years or less was 40.3%. Respondents were asked to name the professional fields of work relevant to their current employment: psychiatry was the most frequently named field (79.7%) followed by epidemiology (28.1%) and psychology (25.0%) (see Table 1).

Table 1 Current professional background* (% of total)

	N	%
Psychiatry (incl. schizophrenia, social psychiatry)	51	79.7
Epidemiology	18	28.1
Psychology	16	25.0
Genetics	3	4.7
Nursing	2	3.1
Other science (total)	8	12.5
Breakdown of other science:		
Public health	3	4.7
Psychopharmacology	2	3.1
Drugs/alcohol	1	1.6
Neuroscience	1	1.6
Personality assessment	1	1.6
Social sciences	1	1.6
Statistics	1	1.6

* Respondents were able to select more than one field

Conference attendance

The median number of conferences attended over the past 5 years was 2. The percentage attending ASPR conferences varied. While 10.9% of members had not attended any ASPR conferences in the years 1995-99, 14.1% had attended all five. Attendance was highest for conferences in the two largest capital cities, Sydney in 1999 (64.1% had attended) and Melbourne in 1995 (54.7%). A similar percentage attended the three conferences between 1996 and 1998 but the level of attendance over

these years was markedly lower than attendance in 1995 and 1999 (40.6% attended in Brisbane in 1998, 40.6% attended in Wellington in 1997, and 37.5% attended in Newcastle in 1996).

As one-third of respondents (32.3%) had been members for less than five years, this was a major factor influencing conference attendance. Respondents were asked to select reasons for conference non-attendance from a list of options. The most frequently selected reason for non-attendance was work/time pressures (54.7%), followed by the high cost of travel and accommodation (21.9%), inconvenience of location (12.5%), and irrelevant or uninteresting topics (9.4%). A quarter of the sample proffered other reasons for non-attendance that were not included in the list of options. The most common of these was timing (noted by 10.9% of the total sample) mainly due to clashes with overseas trips and university exams. See Table 2.

Table 2: Reasons for non-attendance at conferences*

	N	%
Work/time pressures	35	54.7
Travel/accommodation costs too high	14	21.9
Inconvenience of location	8	12.5
Topics irrelevant; not interesting	6	9.4
Registration costs too high	3	4.7
Applied for but did not get work/uni funding	2	3.1
Abstract for talk not accepted	1	1.6
Applied for but did not get ASPR funding	0	0.0
Other reason (most common reason was timing - 10.9% of total sample)	15	23.4

* Respondents were able to select more than one field

Cost and usefulness of membership

Most members (87.5%) thought the annual cost of membership was about right. About half the survey respondents (51.6%) thought membership was useful to them and a further 10.9% said it was very useful. However, as many as one-quarter felt it was not as useful as they would like it to be. Very few indicated that membership was not useful at all.

Importance and current provision of services

The survey specified 14 activities and services and asked respondents both to rate how important these ASPR activities and services were to them, as well as how good ASPR's current provision of these activities and services was. Responses to these items are summarised in Table 3. Three of the four activities most frequently rated by members as important or very important related to the annual meeting, emphasising the importance of the annual meeting for ASPR members. These activities were: hearing presentations of other research (98.4%), presenting one's own research (93.8%), and keeping in contact with other researchers at the annual meeting (92.2%). At the same time, the responses on the current provision of these activities indicated room for improvement. Very few were dismissive of the current provision of these services, with the proportion rating current provision as not good or quite poor ranging from 3 to 8 percent. However, a third (32.8%) rated the opportunity for contact with others as middling, 35.9% rated the opportunity to hear other research as middling, and up to 45.3% rated the opportunity to present their own research as middling.

The fourth item most frequently rated as important or very important was e-mail notification of ASPR matters which 93.8% of respondents rated as important or very important, with as many as 71.9% rating the current provision of this service as good or very good.

Other activities rated by a very large majority as important or very important were the provision of travel scholarships (89.1%) and annual researcher awards such as the Founder's Medal, Novartis

Award and Organon Award (85.9%), the maintenance of the ASPR web site (85.9%), and e-mail notification to members of a variety of non-ASPR matters including research funding opportunities (85.9%), conferences and workshops (82.8%), and job opportunities (81.3%). The current provision of awards was regarded as good or very good by the majority (54.7%); the figure was a little lower for the provision of travel scholarships (43.8%). Respondents were a little more critical of the ASPR web site, and much more critical of e-mail dissemination of information for members, with almost one in five rating the notification of job opportunities as not good or poor and about one-quarter rating the notification of research funding opportunities and of conferences and workshops as not good or poor.

Lower ranked activities in terms of importance to members were e-mail notifications to members of new publications (71.9%), the award of best debut presentation and poster prizes at the annual meeting (70.3%), the provision of a newsletter (70.3%), and receipt of minutes of the AGM (51.6%).

One important element to emerge from the analysis of these data was the high percentage of *don't know/missing* responses with respect to the current provision of services. In fact, very few of these were missing responses. The percentage of *don't know/missing* responses was as high as 37.5% for the web site item, and around the 25 to 30 percent mark for e-mail notification of funding opportunities, conferences and new publications. Levels for items on the provision of scholarships, awards and prizes were in the 20 to 25 percent range. Possible explanations for such high figures include members not accessing the web site, members receiving but not opening ASPR e-mail, members receiving ASPR e-mail too infrequently to be able to evaluate a service, new members not knowing about services, and poor ASPR dissemination about its services.

Table 3: Importance and current provision of specified activities

	% Considering important, very important	Current provision (%)	
Hearing other research at annual meeting	98.4	good, very good	48.4
		middling	35.9
		not good, quite poor	3.1
		don't know/missing*	12.5
		TOTAL	100.0
Presenting own research at annual meeting	93.8	good, very good	35.9
		middling	45.3
		not good, quite poor	7.8
		don't know/missing*	10.9
		TOTAL	100.0
Email notification of ASPR matters	93.8	good, very good	71.9
		middling	15.6
		not good, quite poor	7.8
		don't know/missing*	4.7
		TOTAL	100.0
Contact with others at annual meeting	92.2	good, very good	48.4
		middling	32.8
		not good, quite poor	6.3
		don't know/missing*	12.5
		TOTAL	100.0
Travel scholarships for young researchers to attend annual meeting	89.1	good, very good	43.8
		middling	20.3
		not good, quite poor	10.9
		don't know/missing*	25.0
		TOTAL	100.0

	% Considering important, very important	Current provision (%)	
Annual researcher awards	85.9	good, very good	54.7
		middling	21.9
		not good, quite poor	3.1
		don't know/missing*	20.3
		TOTAL	100.0
ASPR web site	85.9	good, very good	21.9
		middling	32.8
		not good, quite poor	7.8
		don't know/missing*	37.5
		TOTAL	100.0
Email notification of research funding opportunities	85.9	good, very good	20.3
		middling	23.4
		not good, quite poor	25.0
		don't know/missing*	31.3
		TOTAL	100.0
Email notification of conferences, workshops	82.8	good, very good	20.3
		middling	29.7
		not good, quite poor	25.0
		don't know/missing*	25.0
		TOTAL	100.0
Email notification of job opportunities	81.3	good, very good	42.2
		middling	26.6
		not good, quite poor	17.2
		don't know/missing*	14.1
		TOTAL	100.0
Email notification of new publications	71.9	good, very good	26.6
		middling	25.0
		not good, quite poor	18.8
		don't know/missing*	29.7
		TOTAL	100.0
Best debut presentation/poster presentation prizes	70.3	good, very good	45.3
		middling	28.1
		not good, quite poor	3.1
		don't know/missing*	23.4
		TOTAL	100.0
Newsletter	70.3	<i>not applicable</i>	
Receipt of minutes of AGM	51.6	good, very good	20.3
		middling	35.9
		not good, quite poor	12.5
		don't know/missing*	31.3
		TOTAL	100.0

* Most of these were 'don't know' responses; the proportion of missing responses was very low.

Comments on web site

Some 47% of respondents (30 members) made one or more comments about the web site. Many stressed the importance of the web site in the provision of information to members and some proposed enhancements relating to ASPR mainstream activities including posting copies of ASPR e-mail alerts (1 comment), minutes of the AGM (1), updates on planning for the forthcoming annual conference (1) and copies of abstracts from previous ASPR annual meetings (3) on the web site. One respondent suggested that an increase in membership fees could be used to substantially improve the current site. Only a very small number of respondents said they either had not seen the web site or generally did

not use web sites. Several respondents pointed out that there would be no need for a newsletter if the web site was fully developed, especially if it included a *What's New* page.

One of the features most commonly requested was the provision of good links to other sites (12 comments), particularly to Australian research sites and organisations, but also to international, remote and service-oriented sites. One member suggested links to research instruments and electronic forms on the net.

Another frequent request (12 comments) was for the inclusion of a members' directory with contact details. Most also wanted information on members' research interests and areas of expertise. One respondent suggested that reports of research undertaken by ASPR members could be included here, and another suggested ASPR could provide host sites for researchers to advertise their research activities. One respondent proposed the inclusion of a search engine to facilitate access to contact details; however, another cautioned that member details should be made available to ASPR members only. In addition to these 12 comments, a further four respondents wanted details of local and international research activities on the web site that were not limited to the activities of ASPR members.

The use of the web site as a forum for electronic dissemination and discussion of research and related matters including research politics and policy, and potential collaborations was also a common theme (12 comments). One respondent suggested setting up a listserv for members with similar interests. Other suggestions were the facilitation of a consumer forum; electronic publication of synopses of PhD research topics; inclusion of features such as monthly themes on topics of research interest, feature articles and critiques, and case studies of evidence into practice; and the use of the web as a vehicle for the criticism of draft papers, particularly for more isolated members. One respondent suggested using the web to set up consultation services in areas of special expertise such as advanced statistical methods.

Other features proposed included access to information on funding opportunities and/or links to funding agencies (6 comments) with one New Zealand member noting the need to extend notification of funding opportunities to opportunities outside of Australia; a calendar of relevant conferences (6); and the notification of job opportunities on the web site (3).

General comments

Some 38% of respondents (24 members) made one or more general comments. The subject most frequently raised was the annual meeting (14 comments). While content coverage of the meetings did not feature as a major issue in the comments, 9.4% of respondents had given irrelevant or uninteresting topics as a reason for non-attendance in the body of the survey. One member preferred the focus of some conferences over others, and another commented on the absence of qualitative research. However, as two respondents commented, specialisation and fragmentation within ASPR are problems that may be hard to avoid. One respondent suggested greater consumer involvement at meetings, with presentations by those who could articulate their experience (for example, Michael Leunig, Anne Deveson, or some other, not necessarily high profile, consumer). And one respondent suggested a more consultative process between conference organisers and committee members. Of those who commented, the general view was that that the annual meeting should provide the opportunity for both established and new researchers to present papers. Papers by established researchers would encourage their attendance and ensure dissemination about current research activities; presentations by younger researchers was an important learning experience. As one respondent wrote:

I think the key & most important function of ASPR is an annual meeting where the best ANZ psychiatric research is presented. and where one can catch up with other researchers. In

addition it is important to provide a forum for the development and encouragement of new researchers, and where they can measure themselves against the best in ANZ.

One respondent would consider not attending future meetings if a recent trend not to accept many papers continued. Two respondents highlighted the importance of travel grants for young researchers to attend the meeting, and one person suggested the number of grants available could be increased by raising membership fees slightly, with very low fees for postgraduate students. One person advocated the publication of ASPR abstracts in a special edition of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry. Another wanted to see local State meetings as well as the annual national meeting.

There was only one general comment on the location of meetings – from a New Zealand member who preferred flights that could be completed in one leg. In the body of the survey, inconvenience of location was put forward as a reason for non-attendance by 12.5% of respondents.

There were 10 comments on matters relating to membership. One respondent thought there may be researchers who could contribute to ASPR but who were not aware of its existence. Another wrote that providing new members with an information sheet listing ASPR services would inform them better about the services available. Other issues raised with regard to new members included difficulties in meeting people at the annual meeting, especially for those without prior connections, for example, those trained overseas, and the need to integrate new members better with older members. Four comments were directed specifically at the issue of inclusivity: two were critical of a perceived elitist old boys' network within ASPR, one said ASPR could be less 'youth-obsessed' and do more to encourage older psychiatrists to get involved in research, and one thought it could be more inclusive of non-medical researchers. One respondent advocated the formation of a women's research group within ASPR and proposed a women's breakfast with an invited speaker at the annual meeting. Two members, reiterating an issue raised many times in the comments on the web page, stressed the importance of making available a membership directory including members' contact details and research interests. Finally, one member emphasised the importance of providing an ongoing, year-round service for ASPR members – something that has started to happen in the past year or so – to ensure continuity of membership.

A number of respondents wanted to see additional awards by ASPR – for non-medical researchers and for research in general psychiatry (with no age barrier). One respondent suggested replacing awards for 'young' researchers with 'early career' awards without age limits, thereby extending eligibility to those entering psychiatric research as a second career.

A number of new initiatives were put forward. One respondent proposed that ASPR could take a central political position on funding issues for psychiatric research. Other suggestions for services that ASPR could provide included the brokerage of cross-institutional research, a regular review of grant writing techniques, and assistance in research program management skills. One respondent thought the importance of a newsletter would depend on its content; another suggested the biannual publication of a journal, not necessarily peer-reviewed. At the same time, one respondent warned of the possibility of being flooded by some services such as notification of new publications.

Overall, there was not a strong sense of discontent with ASPR: a few were satisfied with the services they were getting already, some were not sure if ASPR provided anything more than just the annual meeting and e-mail notifications (and thought it could provide more), one member specialising in old age psychiatry found that the services provided by FPOA and IPA were sufficient, while most made constructive comments as to areas where ASPR could do more for its members.

Issues for New Zealand members

A separate detailed analysis of the New Zealand responses is not appropriate given their small number. However, 5 of the 8 respondents from New Zealand made comments. An overview of their comments suggests that the issues for this group include the high cost of attending meetings from

New Zealand (flights to major centres were therefore preferable), difficulties in meeting people at ASPR, particularly for members who trained outside of Australia, and the need for the coverage of funding opportunities in ASPR e-mail alerts to extend beyond Australian funding bodies. A couple of New Zealand members noted that they did not routinely use web sites.

Conclusions

The recent survey of ASPR members highlighted the web site as an important resource that could be further developed to meet the needs of members. A good web site was seen as a viable alternative to the publication of a regular newsletter. Three key areas for development were identified:

- The posting of ASPR business – copies of recent email alerts, members' contact details and research interests, ASPR abstracts from previous annual meetings, minutes of previous AGMs;
- Links to mental health research- and service-oriented sites in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere;
- Implementation of the web site as a tool for electronic discussion and the dissemination and exchange of research information.

A *What's New* page to identify recent updates, and perhaps a search engine, would facilitate use of the site. However, once established, good management of the site is essential, with members encouraged to visit it regularly as a means of keeping in touch with current news in Australian and New Zealand psychiatric research; this is particularly true for those who do not routinely use web sites, and especially for members living in more remote locations.

A number of suggestions were made for services which, arguably, may already be better provided by other organisations. For example, research offices at the universities generally maintain good links to funding bodies. ASPR may wish to include links to the best of these on its web site rather than replicate existing sites. Grant writing and project management skills may be better covered by staff development support within a higher education institution or government organisation. Again, ASPR could include links to relevant web sites and alert members to course offerings as they become available. Occasional workshops at the annual meeting may be appropriate. The Wellington meeting, for example, scheduled a lively and well-attended session on NHMRC grant applications which included a role play.

In addition to the development of the web site, the survey also highlighted the importance of the annual scientific meeting for ASPR members who ranked hearing the research of other members at the annual meeting, presenting their own research, and keeping in contact with other researchers among the top four of 14 listed activities that ASPR should be providing. The importance of the annual meeting is not surprising as it has been the main focus of ASPR activities for a long time and, until recently, one of the few regular services provided for members. Furthermore, despite other changes that ASPR may be contemplating, it will continue to play a focal role for many members. Given this, conference organising committees need to ensure that every opportunity is given to both new and established researchers to present papers at these meetings, a position strongly held by a number of respondents.

The most frequently given reason for non-attendance at the annual meeting was work/time pressures. Some attempt has been made in recent years to accommodate exam time-tabling when setting meeting dates. While work/time pressures will inevitably continue to keep some members away, one of the best methods of assuring good attendance is to provide an attractive program and a dynamic research-oriented environment that encourages researchers to attend.

Although attendance data suggest that holding the annual meeting in the larger capital cities will boost attendance levels, it is important to balance this against the opportunity for local attendance that results when the meeting is spread between a variety of sites including smaller cities and more isolated locations. The loss in attendance numbers is traded off against a rise in the profile of ASPR in

the host city, the benefits of involvement of senior researchers in ASPR activities through their organisation of the meeting, and the accessibility afforded to younger, often poorer, researchers and postgraduate students, who may rarely have the opportunity to travel any distance to ASPR meetings. With respect to the latter, members not only supported the award of travel grants to postgraduate students but argued to have the travel grant scheme expanded.

At the same time, members raised a number of issues that need to be addressed by the ASPR committee specifically, and by the membership as a whole. These include matters of inclusivity, particularly for new members, but also for members in less traditional areas of research. The comments made did not include strategies for dealing with these issues, except for one respondent who suggested forming a women's group within ASPR as well as having a breakfast session for women at the annual meeting. It may be that ASPR needs to facilitate the growth of special interest groups, and that members with special interests need to work to establish their own networks. With regard to new members, it should be easy enough to provide a list of members from the same geographical area; it may even be possible to provide a 'mentor' from the area at their first annual meeting to aid their initial integration. At a broader level, it behoves members to extend a special courtesy to newer members; a personal observation is that this already happens much of the time.

Thematic coverage by ASPR, particularly at the annual meetings, is problematic, not only because mental health covers a wide range of disorders but also because the fields of study used in mental health research range across such diverse areas as neuroscience, genetics, public health science, epidemiology and psychopharmacology, to name just a few. It may be that flavour of each meeting will differ and members may need to tolerate some variety at this level. This will be better tolerated if these members are given the opportunity to hear and present research in their own area of specialisation at the same meeting.

Finally, some respondents proposed novel directions for ASPR including the development of a central political position on funding issues for psychiatric research and the brokerage of cross-institutional research. These are important areas for future consideration by the peak body for psychiatric research in Australia and New Zealand.