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International Day of Women and Girls in Science: Highlighting the Centenary Institute's Laura Yeates

Laura Yeates is available for interview by media. She is able to talk about her passion for science, her tips for aspiring young female scientists and her experiences as a cardiac genetic counsellor working at a medical research institute.

Laura Yeates leads a science-centric life. She's a cardiac genetic counsellor at the Centenary Institute (a medical research institute based in Sydney). She's also the Chair of the Australasian Society of Genetic Counsellors and is one year into a PhD which is focused on caring for families affected by sudden cardiac death (SCD) of a young relative.

This International Day of Women and Girls in Science, we recognise Laura for her continuing dedication to science, celebrate her achievements as a successful woman in STEMM and show how rewarding a career in science can be.

"Science has always been a large part of my life and has provided me with so many wonderful opportunities, both at a personal and professional level," says Laura.

"I've always loved science—firstly as a child and then right through school as well. I knew I wanted to do a science degree at University and to see where that might take me."

"It was there that I discovered my passion for genetics. Learning about genes, how they're responsible for running all the processes in our body—and how a faulty or altered gene can lead to specific diseases and disorders. It was all absolutely fascinating to me."

Genetic counselling

After graduation, Laura's interest in genetics led her to successfully completing a Graduate Diploma of Genetic Counselling. A role as a cardiac genetic counsellor within the Centenary Institute's Molecular Cardiology Program followed shortly thereafter. In 2014, Laura completed her Genetic Counselling Certification with the Human Genetics Society of Australasia.

"As a genetic counsellor, my job involves meeting and working with individuals and family members affected by genetic heart disease. This can include supporting family members who have lost loved ones, often involving children and young adults," says Laura

"Sudden cardiac death in older people (over the age of 35) tends to be due to coronary heart disease / blocked arteries," she says.

"In younger people however, sudden cardiac death is more commonly due to genetic heart disease. It is a traumatic time for families. It's not just the death of the family member they are coping with but if we suspect or determine the cause of death to be genetic, then other family members may be at risk as well."

In her role, Laura works closely with clinicians and researchers investigating the possible causes of sudden death to be able to provide the genetic counselling to the individuals and families affected.

“It’s a critical role that combines the need for both scientific knowledge as well as high level inter-personal and communication skills,” says Laura.

“You need to be able to understand the science and mechanisms of disease but also have an understanding of how the changes in our DNA can impact someone’s life. It is a privilege to work closely with people, helping them navigate through the different ways the disease may impact their lives, whether that be sports restriction, communicating to family members about their genetic condition or understanding the results of their genetic testing.”

Chair of the Australasian Society of Genetic Counsellors

A cardiac genetic counsellor for fourteen years, Laura became Chair of the Australasian Society of Genetic Counsellors in 2018.

“It is an absolute pleasure to Chair the Australasian Society of Genetic Counsellors, to represent my colleagues and to advocate for them as they go about their work. Although, this volunteer role does take some time, I feel it’s important to put your hand up and give back to the profession. I love being a genetic counsellor and it is an honour to lead this group as we advocate for our members and raise awareness of what we do across the wider community,” she says.

“Over the last two years we’ve rolled out webinars and online training options for members, established a Diversity, Inclusivity, Cultural Competence and Equity (DICE) Working Group, and shortly, will be launching a pilot mentoring program to support members in all stages of their careers. It’s all very exciting being a part of these initiatives.”

Further learning

Not content to sit on her laurels, Laura has also committed to further learning and was the recent recipient of a prestigious co-funded NHMRC and National Heart Foundation PhD scholarship. This is supporting her study into improving care for families affected by the sudden cardiac death of a young relative.

“The psychological effects of sudden cardiac death on a family is significant and lifelong. My research is all about how we can better provide support measures to help these vulnerable family members over both the short and long term,” she says.

Now one year into her study Laura still works part time as a genetic counsellor at Centenary but is enjoying the challenges of her PhD research too.

“As a mature student I’m living proof that it’s never too late to start your PhD!”

Advice

To any aspiring young women who are thinking about further education and a career in science, Laura has some sage advice.

“Keep learning about the topics you enjoy, particularly when it comes to study. You’ll find the experience more exciting and probably do much better as well!”

She also stresses the fact that decisions are never absolute.

“You can always change your courses mid-stream if you find that they’re not right for you. Or if you have an interest in several areas—why not do a double degree? People have multiple careers these days and your study is never wasted.”

The key thing says Laura, is to always be looking for what interests you and to be active in pursuing that in a career sense.

“Most days, I’m extremely happy to be at work. You might have a really difficult conversation with a family but at the end of the day I feel like I’ve made a difference. It’s much more fulfilling to have a job you enjoy. Don’t let other people and their views hold you back. Follow your own dreams and then make it happen.”

Support

A final bright spot in Laura’s busy life? Well, she’s particularly excited if she’s contacted by potential donors wanting to know if they can donate to the Centenary’s research programs.

“Funding for medical research is difficult to obtain—there’s always more work to be done but not much money in the pot to go around. Philanthropy is extremely important to supporting the vital work that we do and we value our supporters and their generosity enormously.”

International Day of Women and Girls in Science is held on the 11th February every year. It came from a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2015, to establish an annual International Day to recognise the critical role women and girls play in both science and technology communities.

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Image:

Laura Yeates, Centenary Institute:

<https://tinyurl.com/y6qfxuwn>

For all media and interview enquiries, please contact

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About the Centenary Institute

The Centenary Institute is a world-leading independent medical research institute, closely affiliated to the University of Sydney and the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Our research focuses on three key areas: cancer, inflammation and cardiovascular disease. Our strength lies in uncovering disease mechanisms and applying this knowledge to improve diagnostics and treatments for patients.

For more information about the Centenary Institute, visit www.centenary.org.au