

MEDIA RELEASE

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ANU researcher offers a unique perspective

A PhD student at The Australian National University who is herself a consumer of mental health services has been awarded a \$26,000 per annum scholarship to research what consumers of mental health services believe should be the priority areas for research into depression and bipolar disorder.

Michelle Banfield, 31, was recently awarded the Ian Scott Scholarship by the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund (ARHRF).

Michelle was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2003 after many years of living with the illness uncontrolled. She is now in the second year of her PhD at the Depression & Anxiety Consumer Research Unit at the ANU Centre for Mental Health Research. The research unit is staffed by academics and graduate students who have personal experience with depression and anxiety disorders. Michelle's supervisors are Associate Professor Kathy Griffiths and Professor Helen Christensen.

Michelle says there is growing recognition of the importance of including people living with mental illness as active partners in mental health research.

"It's recognized that the best quality outcomes for health consumers occur when consumers and researchers work in research partnerships. However while there is now a higher degree of consumer involvement in the research process, consumers are still not being adequately consulted when setting research priorities," says Michelle.

As part of Michelle's PhD study, mental health consumers and advocates have been invited to share their ideas about what they consider are the top priorities for mental health research. The ideas generated from these group and individual discussions will be used to survey a wider population of mental health consumers.

"Despite setbacks in my academic career due to episodes of illness, the experience of living with bipolar disorder allows me to combine a consumer perspective with professional research skills," says Michelle.

"This combination helps ensure my research remains in touch with the mental health community at large."

Australian Rotary Health Chairman Ian Oliver said the Fund was pleased to award the Ian Scott Scholarship to a researcher with such a unique and valuable perspective.

The Australian Rotary Health Research Fund is a multi-district project for Rotary in Australia, with over 1,175 Rotary clubs and 34,370 Rotarians supporting it. It is one of the largest independent medical research funds in the country. Over the past seven years the Fund has awarded more than \$9.7 million in research grants and scholarships. For more information, see www.arhrf.org.au.