



**OCTOBER 2019**

# Women in STEM

DECADAL CHAMPION RESPONSE

## **Introduction**

**In the Australian medical research sector, we currently have a disproportionately lower representation of women than men at senior research and decision-making levels. Fully accessing our entire scientific talent pool at all levels makes us more efficient and maximises our chances of making discoveries.**

**SVI aims to ensure a workplace culture of inclusion and gender equality through the implementation of policies and practices that break down potential barriers and actively foster equal representation and participation at all levels, with a particular emphasis is on women, in recognition of their often-greater carer responsibilities. At SVI, we have taken a number of strategic steps in recent years to foster the careers of women.**

## **Leadership**

Women are an integral part of SVI including at governance and senior executive levels.

Leading by example:

- Half of SVI's senior researcher cohort are female, all appointed as Professors. SVI's Associate and Deputy Director are female. Four of the five members of SVI's Executive are women.
- SVI ensures that there is strong female representation on all committees, in particular promotion and recruitment panels and committees that influence policy development, such as the SVI Faculty Executive. Men and women on these committees are assigned responsibilities of equal importance.
- The SVI Institute and Foundation Boards are currently composed of 58% women. The Chair of SVI's Foundation is a woman and the previous Chair of the Board of governance, a female, held the position for 13 years. SVI is part of St Vincent's Health Australia, which is under the care of a remarkable group of women – the Sisters of Charity.

A 4-day Research Leadership Development Program is offered annually. One of these funded positions is dedicated only to SVI women.

The retention of valuable women in the research sector is determined by funding. SVI has provided additional support to several of its researchers while competition for peer-reviewed grant funding is tight. SVI has annually secured dedicated private philanthropic funding in the form of two Fellowships for women who have experienced career disruption.

New strategies to address retention of women in the health and medical research sector will include, but not be limited to, identification of gender-specific training and skills development, e.g. academic promotion information and CV preparation specifically for women; specific mentoring for women with high potential or those at-risk of leaving the sector; and adoption of a flexible approach to dealing with the needs of female staff, ensuring adequate support is provided for female researchers.

## **Evaluation**

Associate Director Professor Helen Thomas leads the Gender Equity and Diversity portfolio at SVI. Part of this role involves regularly reviewing our gender equity strategy and assessing the effectiveness of the initiatives and procedures we have in place. SVI's Gender Equality and Diversity Committee is comprised of active researchers at all career stages, with both male and female representation.

SVI reports to, and is assessed by, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency of the Australian Government.

## **Workplace culture**

### ***Paid parental leave and flexible work practices***

SVI offers a combination of paid and unpaid parental leave. SVI recognises that family responsibilities extend beyond any period of parental leave, and workplace flexibility is offered. This includes part-time work, and flexible start and stop times, purchased leave, compressed weeks, and portions of the working week carried out from home.

SVI also strives to ensure family-friendly meeting times, and access to meetings by teleconference or VoIP communication. Scientists have access to a laptop that they can take home for work purposes. While staff are on parental leave, their email accounts are maintained, and invitations are made to events and meetings with optional attendance. SVI has dedicated facilities for nursing mothers.

### ***Dedicated Funding opportunities for female researchers***

SVI has specifically sought opportunities for partnerships with philanthropic supporters who have an interest in gender equity. This has resulted in two Fellowships being made available specifically for women.

Since 2013, the annual SVI Women in Research Award has been presented to a female post-doctoral scientist at a Mother's Day celebration to assist in the continuance of her work either while she is absent on maternity leave or on a reduced time fraction due to carer responsibilities.



### ***Workplace culture review***

SVI recently undertook a workforce culture survey, including the identification and measurement of any gender specific differences across the workforce. An action plan will emanate from the results of this survey on all key areas, including gender equity initiatives where indicated.

### ***Mentor program***

Support from other senior researchers offering knowledge, experience and practical help can help increase women's participation. To assist with this, an internal mentorship/foster program is available for all early and mid-career researchers at SVI. SVI also actively encourages its female researchers to attend externally organized networking events.

Mid-career researchers who decide to move away from "hands on" laboratory work are offered alternative employment within SVI where possible to keep these valuable people in the medical research sector.

### **Visibility**

Three outstanding female senior scientists have been appointed as Associate or Deputy Directors of SVI. Recently SVI successfully applied to have the work of these female scientists recognised by the University of Melbourne through Honorary Professorial appointments. Social events were arranged to celebrate the achievements of these three women and to inspire other female researchers to achieve the same level of success.

The successes of female scientists at SVI is highlighted on social media, the SVI website and in the SVI quarterly newsletter.

Strong female representation is sought on institute-sponsored seminars and meetings. Last year, 47% of the weekly SVI seminars were given by women.

### **Education**

As a member institution of the Mary Aikenhead Ministries, SVI has been encouraged to pursue development of specific educational activities with female high school students to encourage an interest in STEM. This has involved regular annual school tours for students from Siena College, St Columba's College and Genazzano FCJ College. Tours of our laboratories by SVI researchers and inspirational presentations and informal chats with our postgraduate students expose students early to information on the development of a career in science.



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