The value of consumer and community involvement in research is increasingly being recognised and embraced by funding bodies, research institutions and governments across the world with a wide range of initiatives being developed to support and facilitate partnerships between researchers and the community. There has been a steady increase in the uptake of meaningful consumer and community involvement across the Australian research arena over the past two decades.

The University of Western Australia’s School of Population Health and the Telethon Kids Institute established a consumer and community involvement program in 1998 in response to community concerns about the development of linked data research being undertaken at that time. This program achieved national and international recognition as a good practice model for consumer and community involvement in research. It is underpinned by the joint NHMRC and Consumers Health Forum’s Statement on Consumer and Community Involvement (2016).

Three-year funding provided by WA’s Lotterywest in 2016 enabled the establishment of the Western Australian Health Translation Network’s Consumer and Community Health Research Network (the Network). This exciting initiative, which is a first for Australia, will see the involvement program expand across WA universities, research institutes and tertiary health services.

The establishment of the Network has facilitated the development of a strategic framework to support consumer and community involvement across the partner organisations of the Western Australian Health Translation Network via a team of consumer advocates working initially in seven research organisations.
CONSUMER AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS:
A database of over 1000 consumers and community members, known as the Involvement Network, provides access to a diverse range of people interested in research. Opportunities for involvement in research are advertised through the Network’s website and social media.

GOVERNANCE:
Community oversight is an integral aspect of the Consumer and Community Health Research Network. A range of strategic level committees and advisory groups has been established since 2006 to enhance the quality and relevance of research activities. Strong collaborations with national and state consumer peak bodies such as Consumers Health Forum and Health Consumers Council WA provide a further level of community oversight to the work of the Network.

METHODS FOR INVOLVEMENT:
Tried and tested methods for involving consumers and community members in research are available for researchers to implement involvement activities in their research. A ‘one size does not fit all’ philosophy means that any of these methods can be modified to suit a diverse range of projects. This resulted in 369 community members serving on 43 research and organisational committees in 2016.

TEACHING AND TRAINING:
Training is a core platform of the Network. Responding to requests from researchers and community members for training, a range of bespoke workshops are now available. Over 960 researchers, students, clinicians, administrators, consumers and community members from across Australia have attended 65 workshops on the ‘how and why’ of implementing consumer and community involvement in research. These workshops are one-of-a-kind in Australia and have been developed in collaboration with a UK consultant. An evaluation of the researcher workshops was published in 2016.

PROGRAM OF WORK
The consumer advocates, jointly funded by the Consumer and Community Health Research Network and the partner organisations supported by a team of staff within the Network, will deliver a comprehensive program of work and services that are supported by the following six core components:

ADVOCACY AND ADVICE:
A face-to face service provided to researchers, students, consumers and community members to support and advise on implementing involvement activities. A dedicated website houses a range of resources, publications, topical issues, training opportunities and events.

AN EVIDENCE BASE:
Evidence for the impact and value of consumer and community involvement is key to the success of the Network. Audits of existing involvement activities will be undertaken in 2017 using a tool developed and implemented in 2010 and 2013 in collaboration with researchers and community members.

CONSUMER AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS:
A database of over 1000 consumers and community members, known as the Involvement Network, provides access to a diverse range of people interested in research. Opportunities for involvement in research are advertised through the Network’s website and social media.

GOVERNANCE:
Community oversight is an integral aspect of the Consumer and Community Health Research Network. A range of strategic level committees and advisory groups has been established since 2006 to enhance the quality and relevance of research activities. Strong collaborations with national and state consumer peak bodies such as Consumers Health Forum and Health Consumers Council WA provide a further level of community oversight to the work of the Network.

METHODS FOR INVOLVEMENT:
Tried and tested methods for involving consumers and community members in research are available for researchers to implement involvement activities in their research. A ‘one size does not fit all’ philosophy means that any of these methods can be modified to suit a diverse range of projects. This resulted in 369 community members serving on 43 research and organisational committees in 2016.

TEACHING AND TRAINING:
Training is a core platform of the Network. Responding to requests from researchers and community members for training, a range of bespoke workshops are now available. Over 960 researchers, students, clinicians, administrators, consumers and community members from across Australia have attended 65 workshops on the ‘how and why’ of implementing consumer and community involvement in research. These workshops are one-of-a-kind in Australia and have been developed in collaboration with a UK consultant. An evaluation of the researcher workshops was published in 2016.

THE FUTURE
Our goal over the coming three years is to further expand the Network to offer our services across the Western Australian Health Translation Network. Funding, dedicated staff, engaged and involved consumers, community members and researchers supported by a comprehensive program of work will ensure the Network has the right ‘mix’ to continue delivering opportunities for consumers and community members to use their lived experiences to guide and influence research priorities, policy and practice components.