



**Australian
Frailty
Network**

Australian Frailty Network

Annual report 2023

afn.org.au



Table of Contents

Director’s Message	3
About AFN	4
Aegium Foundation Support	6
The Year in Highlights	7
Competitive funding	7
Research dissemination and engagement	8
Publications	8
Our Partners	9
Programs of Work	9
ReFIT Study	10
FITTEST Study	11
Frailty-ADD Centre of Research Excellence	12
Program 1: Prevalence and outcomes	13
Program 2: Pharmaco-epidemiology	13
Program 3: Core outcomes for frail inpatients	13
Program 4: Practice change initiatives	13
Program 5: Implementation studies	13
Program 6: Education and training	13
Consumer and Community Involvement	14



Director's Message

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Australian Frailty Network's inaugural annual report. Our mission is bold but critical; to increase our understanding of the measurement, management, and mechanisms of frailty in order to provide better care and improve patient outcomes.

Through a multifaceted approach encompassing research, knowledge creation, evidence sharing, and training support, we are dedicated to creating a system-wide response to frailty across community, hospital and aged care settings.

Central to our efforts is the establishment of a consumer-driven frailty research agenda. By actively involving individuals, their families, and caregivers in shaping our initiatives, we ensure that our work remains firmly grounded in the lived experiences and needs of those directly affected by frailty. This inclusive approach fosters empathy and understanding and ensures that our solutions are truly tailored to address real-world challenges.

We are committed to bridging the gap between research findings and practical application, ensuring that the insights gained through our work have a tangible impact on the lives of Australians. Moreover, we recognise the importance of building capacity and capability among future research leaders, equipping them with the tools and resources necessary to continue driving innovation in the field of frailty research.

The AFN is dedicated to engaging with peak bodies, communities, consumers, international partnerships, and policy makers to advocate for sustained investment in healthy ageing initiatives. Together, we can effect meaningful change and pave the way for a future where those with frailty can remain active, independent, and engaged members of society.

In closing, I extend my gratitude to all those who have contributed to the AFN's success thus far. Your dedication, passion, and unwavering support are the driving forces behind our mission. As we navigate the challenges and opportunities ahead, I am confident that together, we can make a profound and lasting impact on the lives of Australians.

Sincerely,



Professor Ruth E. Hubbard

BSc MBBS MRCP MSc MD FRACP

Director | Australian Frailty Network



About AFN

The Australian Frailty Network (AFN) was launched in 2023, led by Professor Ruth Hubbard at the University of Queensland’s Centre for Health Services Research (CHSR), and supported by funding from the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF).

Our Vision

Our vision is to deliver a national response to frailty and help all Australians age well.

Our Statements of Purpose

Establish stakeholder priorities for frailty and ageing research

Facilitate and conduct high quality research that generates new knowledge to improve health outcomes

Share evidence-based information about frailty and ageing with the public and health professionals

Build capacity in multidisciplinary and translational frailty research

Enable translation of research into practice and policy through collaborations and partnerships

Our Values

Collaboration

Inclusivity

Consumer-focus

Courage

Excellence



The first AFN Summit, held in February 2023, convened a broad spectrum of partners and stakeholders. This gathering solidified our vision, values, and agreed upon five key objectives.

In 2023, AFN research fellows Dr Natasha Reid and Dr Adrienne Young visited established frailty networks in the UK and Canada, countries with demographics and health systems similar to Australia. Their insights have shaped the AFN's focus on integrating research and practical application, with an emphasis on education to incorporate frailty management into routine care. The AFN has also updated its governance structure to prioritise inclusivity and consumer engagement.

The AFN was introduced to a wider audience at the 2023 Australian Association of Gerontology conference on the Gold Coast. The positive response from attendees has paved the way for future interdisciplinary collaborations with researchers and consumer partners across Australia.





Aegium Foundation Support

A donation from the Aegium Foundation facilitated the integration of telehealth and virtual interview rooms into the Centre for Health Services Research building on the PAH campus. These 'Zoom Rooms', made available to the Ageing and Geriatric Medicine team in late 2023, have enhanced the AFN team's research and interview capabilities.

Aegium's continued support for Professor Ruth Hubbard's Masonic Chair in Geriatric Medicine has resulted in the expansion of her team to 8 Research Fellows, 11 professional staff, and 18 HDR students under direct supervision. An additional six HDR students are set to join in 2024. Professor Hubbard also continued her contributions to the Doctor of Medicine (MD) program at UQ in 2023, leading the Geriatric Medicine curriculum and chairing the MD admissions board.

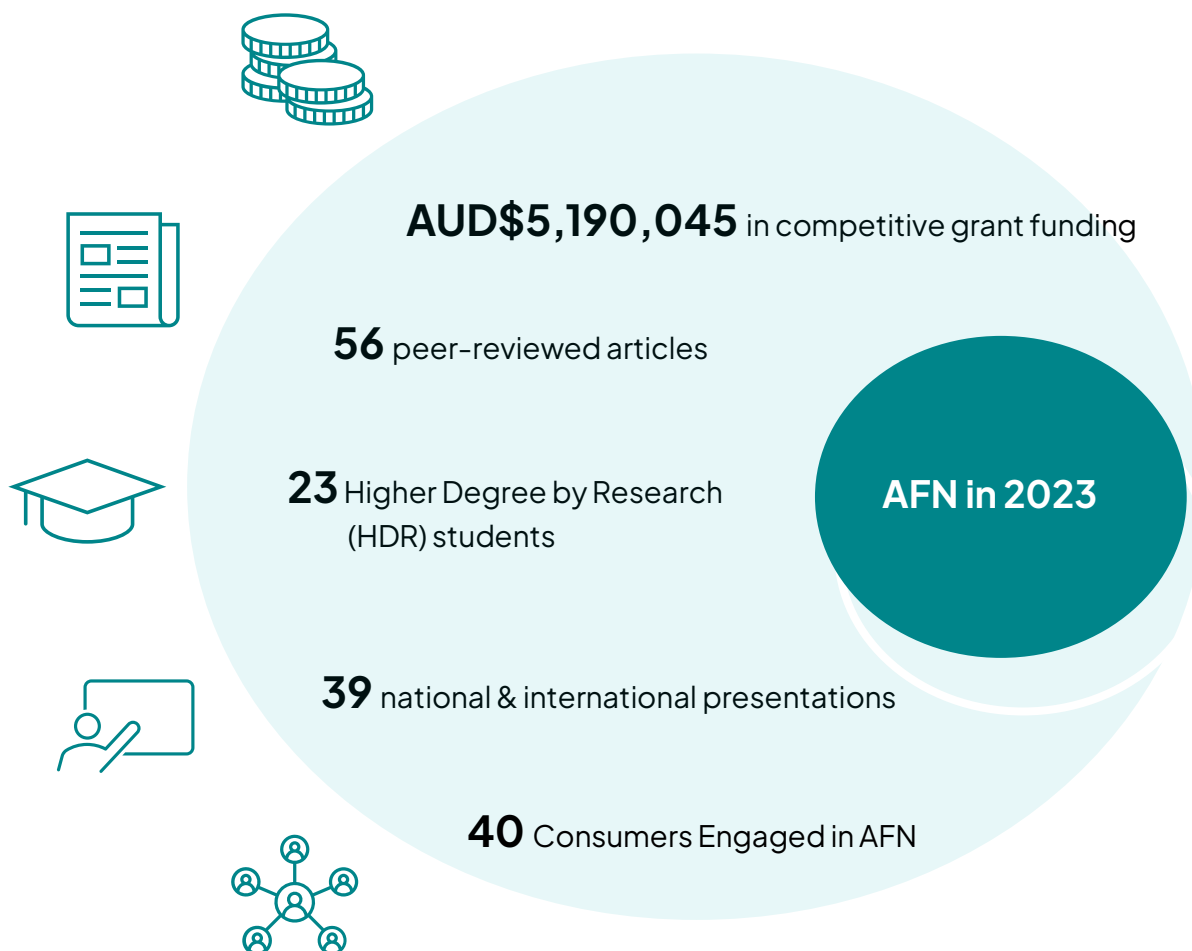
Dr Emily Gordon, also supported by Aegium, has emerged as a leading figure in her field. She supervises seven HDR students, leads the CRE's Frailty Core Outcome Set (IN-FOCUS) Special Interest Group, and was awarded a \$250,000 grant from the 2023 Metro South Hospital Research Support Scheme Project. As a key contributor and Co-Convenor of the successful 2023 ANZ Society for Geriatric Medicine Annual Scientific Meeting in Brisbane, and an invited speaker at two binational, one national, and one international scientific meeting in 2023, Dr Gordon's influence in the field continues to grow.

 aegiumfoundation.org.au





The Year in Highlights



Competitive funding

Professor Hubbard's team has continued to successfully attract research funds. In 2023, the group was awarded more than AUD\$5.1 million in competitive grant funding. These research projects involve cross-disciplinary and consumer collaborations to conduct research in rarely studied patient populations such as frail older adults with blood cancers, sexuality and gender diverse older adults in assisted care, and older adults in Australian prisons.



Research dissemination and engagement

Professor Hubbard and her team had a significant presence at the 2023 ANZ Society for Geriatric Medicine Annual Scientific Meeting in Brisbane in May, presenting or chairing 13 sessions across the four-day program.

Frailty Nexus, a peer forum for research students, early career researchers and health professionals, delivered five “Learning Link-up” seminars between July and November 2023.

Overall, the team delivered more than 39 presentations at international and national forums, including Professor Hubbard’s Presidential Address at the 2023 Australian Association of Gerontology and her keynote presentation at the ANZ Society for Geriatric Medicine Hawke’s Bay New Zealand Retreat.

Professor Hubbard was also an invited expert for the Australian Cardiovascular Alliance's National Workshop on Frailty and Heart Failure in Sydney in November.

Publications

The international impact of Professor Hubbard’s research team has continued an upward trajectory. The team published 56 peer-reviewed original research manuscripts in 2023, with almost 30% accepted for publication in the top 10% of the most cited journals worldwide.

Team members are recognised as international frailty experts — their publications were 33% more likely to be cited than the global average for similar publications, and a quarter of the 56 manuscripts involved collaboration with international partners.





Our Partners

We take pride in our collaborations with national and international partners in the fields of gerontology, frailty, and allied health, as well as with consumer representatives. Below is a list of the partnerships we have established to date:

Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG)



aag.asn.au

Council on the Ageing (COTA)



cota.org.au

Australian & New Zealand Society for Geriatric Medicine (ANZGSM)



anzsgm.org

Queensland Ageing and Frailty Clinical Network (QDAF)



clinicalexcellence.qld.gov.au

Programs of Work

In 2023, the AFN was focused on three significant research initiatives. These projects were made possible through the support of national grants from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF). The projects include:

- **ReFIT Study:** This study is aimed at understanding the biomedical pathway leading to frailty.
- **FITTEST Study:** This project is designed to assist older individuals in participating in programs that prevent frailty.
- **Frailty-ADD Centre of Research Excellence:** This initiative focuses on improving hospital outcomes for frail patients across different disciplines.

For a more comprehensive understanding of these programs of work, please refer to the subsequent pages of this report.



ReFIT Study

Understanding the biomedical pathway to frailty

Understanding the underlying mechanisms of frailty is essential for developing effective interventions to prevent and treat frailty. However, research on ageing is challenging due to the long timespans required to observe changes in frailty.

Frailty is often associated with advanced age, but it can also occur in younger people, particularly those with chronic, co-morbid or multi-morbid conditions. For example, kidney disease is a major risk factor for frailty, however, kidney transplantation can significantly improve health status in these patients, which suggests that frailty can be reversed in some cases. Organ transplantation can therefore be used as a model to study the underlying biomedical mechanisms of frailty and to develop interventions to prevent and treat this condition.

We predict that frailty second to organ failure will have the same pathophysiology as age-related frailty, and that specific biomedical measures will improve (as frailty improves) in transplant recipients and worsen (as frailty progresses) in patients with kidney disease or age-related frailty.

The results of this study could have important implications for the care of frail patients. By better understanding the factors that contribute to frailty, we can develop more effective treatments and interventions to improve the health and well-being of frail patients.

Study Status

All ethical and governance approvals attained. Recruitment and baseline assessments will begin in 2024. Recruitment will occur over 18 months.

Study Team and Funding

This study is funded through a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2022 Ideas Grant scheme (APP2021074), with a grant duration of four years.

Professor Ruth Hubbard is the Principal Investigator for this study.

The team includes academic geriatricians, biomedical scientists, transplant physicians and surgeons, consumers, and mathematicians.



**ReFIT
Study**

AFN 22-02



FITTEST Study

Supporting older people to participate in frailty prevention programs

In the FITTEST Study, we will be studying how to improve the health and wellbeing of older people by preventing frailty.

We know that programs that promote good nutrition, regular exercise, optimisation of medicines, and social support networks can reduce frailty levels; however, these programs are not routinely available and, where they are, people do not always join in.

The FITTEST Study will compare different ways to support older people to participate in frailty prevention programs

About the study

The FITTEST study will investigate the implementation and effectiveness of a multicomponent frailty program that integrates exercise, nutrition, optimisation of medicines, and social connectedness.

People living in the community aged ≥ 65 years with mild frailty will be randomised to a supervised or self-directed intervention. Each intervention will be based on the latest evidence-based recommendations for exercise, nutrition, optimisation of medicines, and social connectedness, but we will use a different approach to facilitating behaviour change between the groups (health coach and health professional support vs. self-management approach).

Study status

The FITTEST Study protocol has been developed (with significant consumer involvement) and is under review by the ethics committee. Recruitment and baseline assessments will begin in 2024. Recruitment will occur over 18 months.



**FITTEST
Study**

AFN21-01

Study team and funding

This study is funded by the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) Dementia Ageing and Aged Care Mission (APP2016045). Professor Ruth Hubbard is the Principal Investigator for this study.

The team includes Australia's leading researchers in ageing, exercise, nutrition, pharmacology, social connectedness, and implementation science, as well as consumer partners.



Frailty-ADD Centre of Research Excellence

Improving hospital outcomes for frail patients Across Different Disciplines

The NHMRC-funded Frailty-ADD Centre for Research Excellence (CRE), led by Professor Hubbard and coordinated by Dr Kristiana Ludlow and Ms Donna Reidlinger, achieved several milestones in 2023. The inaugural meeting of the CRE Steering Committee, responsible for guiding the CRE's work, took place in July.



In May, Frailty Nexus was launched under the leadership of academic geriatrician and PhD student Dr Benignus Logan. This peer-support forum caters to research students, early career researchers, and health professionals interested in frailty. Frailty Nexus initiated a series of monthly Zoom-based education sessions in July 2023, attracting an average of over 35 live attendees and nearly 50 online views per session throughout the year.

We established the INpatient Frailty Outcomes Consensus (IN-FOCUS) Executive Committee to guide Program 3 of the Frailty-ADD CRE (details on next page). This Committee consists of leading frailty experts, researchers and health professionals across Australia and Internationally. The Committee had its first meeting in August 2023.

Towards the end of 2023, the first round of the annual Frailty-ADD CRE Seed Grant Scheme was open to early career researchers and health professionals to fund research projects that aim to improve outcomes for frail patients in hospital. Two awards of \$10,000 each will be granted annually. The 2024 award recipients will be announced in February, and they will present their research proposals at the 2024 Australian Frailty Network Summit in Brisbane's Customs House in March.

Funding

This study is funded by an NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence: Improving Hospital Outcomes for Frail Patients Across Different Disciplines (APP2015821). Professor Ruth Hubbard is the Principal Investigator for this study.



The Frailty-ADD CRE comprise six research programs. These interrelated programs and structured capacity building have the potential to transform the care of frail patients in Australian hospitals.



Program 1: Prevalence and outcomes

This program is the first of its kind globally to focus on evaluating frailty in hospitals at a large scale. Our aim is to quantify the prevalence of frailty and establish frailty-related outcomes and costs.



Program 2: Pharmaco-epidemiology

This program investigates the relationship between frailty status, medication utilisation, and global health outcomes. Our aim is to analyse medication utilisation and deprescribing patterns according to frailty status.



Program 3: Core outcomes for frail inpatients

The aim of this program is to develop an internationally recognised core outcomes set (a standardised set of outcomes) for frail inpatients that can be used to evaluate interventions across different disciplines.



Program 4: Practice change initiatives

This program aims to empower local leaders to change their practice to provide treatment for inpatients that is appropriate for their level of frailty.



Program 5: Implementation studies

This program aims to undertake implementation studies across different disciplines to test new models of care for patients who are frail.



Program 6: Education and training

The aim of this program is to increase health care professionals' and students' knowledge and understanding of frailty in hospitals.



Consumer and Community Involvement

In 2023, we commenced the co-design of the AFN Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) model, co-led by Dr Adrienne Young and Ms Anja Christoffersen alongside consumer research working group. This best-practice model (illustrated below) embeds consumers in all aspects of the AFN and sets an expectation that all frailty research involves consumers at all stages.

We established the AFN Consumer Network that includes 40+ consumers from across Australia, representing three states (30% of consumers from regional/rural areas) bringing lived experience perspectives of frailty, various illnesses and disabilities, as well as caregiver perspectives.



AFN CCI goals and principles



In 2023, consumers have been involved in nine AFN-led research projects influencing decision making across all research stages.

The outcomes and benefits of these contributions include:



A total of **AUD\$8.1 million of research funding** from five grants where consumers were involved in research planning and grant writing.



Improved research questions and study design through consumers being integral members of the research team and/or governance committees, e.g., more inclusive methods to enable participation by people with diverse access needs, redefinition of target participant group.



Improved design of frailty interventions and education programs. For the FITTEST Study, 15 consumers informed the frailty website content and layout, advised a change in health coach call schedule, and advocated for inclusion of group-based health coaching. The AFN Focus on Frailty digital education modules for health professionals and students were influenced by a consumer advisor and focus groups with 25 consumers who co-designed module topics and content.



Five **research publications co-authored with consumer researchers.** This includes a scoping review led by an AFN-supported PhD student, demonstrating how AFN and consumers are building capacity in CCI.

The AFN is beginning to gain recognition as leaders in CCI, having been invited to attend consumer expos, and to write an editorial on consumers engagement for Australia's leading ageing journal, the Australasian Journal of Ageing.

We are excited to welcome consumers at the 2024 AFN Summit (as participants and members of the organising committee) and for our Consumer Engagement Coordinator to commenced in mid-2024 to consolidate and continue to grow the activity and the impact of our CCI program.

Dr Adrienne Young and Ms Anja Christoffersen

Co-leads | AFN CCI Working Group, on behalf of members:

Ms Chandana Guha (Consumer, NSW), A/Prof Jacki Liddle (UQ/ Metro South Health),
Dr Rosemary Saunders (Edith Cowan University, WA), Ms Paris Milburn (UQ)