



## **Dr Burke's Australia Day Honour puts multiple sclerosis in the spotlight**

MS Australia congratulates Dr Therese Burke who has been honoured for her significant service to medicine, particularly multiple sclerosis research, and to nursing, by being made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in today's 2023 Australia Day Honours List.

Congratulating Dr Burke, MS Australia's CEO Rohan Greenland says Therese represents the very best aspects of the research and nursing profession and is truly a worthy recipient of the award.

"We congratulate Therese and offer our heartfelt thanks and recognition for her invaluable contribution across the entire multiple sclerosis (MS) community, not only in her outstanding area of expertise in MS but in her commitment and dedication as a renowned and much-admired MS nurse," Mr Greenland said.

Dr Burke described receiving the Order of Australia Medal as an acknowledgement of the entire MS medical community and particularly of MS nurses.

"This award is very humbling and an absolute privilege. It is also an acknowledgement to my colleagues, MS nurses and those people living with MS, their families and carers who have shared their stories with me over the years. I am truly honoured," Dr Burke said.

Dr Burke, MS Australia's Clinical Platform Coordinator and an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the University of Notre Dame Australia, started her journey in nursing almost 40 years ago, commencing studies at Westmead Hospital in Sydney, having moved from Dubbo in rural New South Wales.

"I come from a family of nurses and I knew as soon as I started my studies, that I was in the right place. While nursing is a selfless profession, I see it as a real privilege to be let into people's lives in the deepest ways to be able to look after them and help guide them to find the best quality of life that they can have," Dr Burke said.

Dr Burke's dedicated and impressive career has included specialty training in critical care, asthma, immunology and allergy treatment, followed by training and working in complex disease clinical trials.

With the establishment of the first MS clinic at Westmead Hospital, Dr Burke assisted on projects in ground-breaking genetic research alongside talented and like-minded work colleagues. This is where Dr Burke's love of research began.

"The scientists, immunologists and neurologists were all very passionate about patient care and all believed that good nursing care could make a difference in living with chronic illness. I think that's what really grabbed me and pulled me in – to have a chance to make a positive difference in people's lives," Dr Burke said.

Having enthusiastically agreed to work with neurologists in the establishment of the MS clinic, and with no formal training available in Australia at the time, Dr Burke undertook certified training in MS nursing overseas. This later led to a Master's degree exploring the lived experience in MS, which soon turned into a PhD study at the University of Notre Dame Australia.



The MS clinical and research centre grew from 20 patients to hundreds in the first few years and began clinical trials in both MS and Motor Neurone Disease.

“It was hard, challenging work but we knew we were making a positive difference to our patients and that was all we needed to continue and to see the transition in having so many new medications coming to market from all the research that we've contributed to – they were the drivers for me on the days I had nothing left in the tank,” Dr Burke said.

In 2020, Dr Burke joined MS Australia to develop educational modules for clinical trial staff working in MS and to assist in expanding the research world for people living with MS.

“I'm just so happy that we can bring attention to a disease that needs further research investment and more nursing support.

“We've made so many advances, but we still don't have a cure for MS. We don't have all the answers, but we are working steadily towards that day.

“We need sustained, consistent research, supported by funding, particularly for the scientists and clinicians to find that cure, and to support more MS Nurses to improve quality of life along the way, while we work towards the cure,” Dr Burke said.

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**About MS**

MS is the most common acquired chronic neurological disease affecting young adults, often diagnosed between the ages of 20 to 40 and, in Australia, affects three times more women than men. As yet, there is no cure. There is no known single cause of MS, but many genetic and environmental factors have been shown to contribute to its development.

In MS, the body's own immune system mistakenly attacks and damages the fatty material – called myelin – around the nerves. Myelin is important for protecting and insulating nerves so that the electrical messages that the brain sends to the rest of the body, travel quickly and efficiently.

As the myelin breaks down during an MS attack – a process called demyelination – patches of nerves become exposed and then scarred, which renders the nerves unable to communicate messages properly and at risk of subsequent degeneration. This means that the brain cannot talk to other parts of the body, resulting in a range of symptoms that can include a loss of motor function (e.g., walking and hand and arm function, loss of sensation, pain, vision changes and changes to thinking and memory).



### **About MS Australia**

MS Australia is Australia's national multiple sclerosis (MS) not-for-profit organisation that empowers researchers to identify ways to treat, prevent and cure MS, seeks sustained and systemic policy change via advocacy, and acts as the national champion for Australia's community of people affected by MS.

MS Australia represents and collaborates with its state and territory MS Member Organisations, people with MS, their carers, families and friends and various national and international bodies to:

- Fund, coordinate, educate and advocate for MS research as part of the worldwide effort to solve MS
- Provide the latest evidence-based information and resources
- Help meet the needs of people affected by MS.