

## FORM

# THE FAULT, DEAR BRUTUS, IS NOT IN OUR STARS...

The recent success of Norman Doidge's *The Brain that Changes Itself* (Scribe) came as no surprise, being yet another indicator of the growing fascination with and popularity of all things "neuro" in our contemporary society and culture. Brain and mind studies – admittedly not the same thing but often coming under the same umbrella – have a grip on contemporary audiences as we follow the research that takes us deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the brain. While not always accepting strictly secular or rational explanations, nevertheless a majority considering these matters find themselves further compelled by the idea that it is not in the stars, but in our innermost complex chemical and neurological transactions that the key to many behaviours lie. Julius Caesar knew that – or at least, Shakespeare wanted him to.

Just as poets have sought to understand the heart in an altogether different but perhaps parallel way, as the source of all that is human (for better or worse), so we too, nowadays guided by scientists working at the very edge of current knowledge, keep asking for answers regarding the chemical patterns that transmit ceaselessly from one part of the brain to another, and see in this, perhaps, the source of that same all too human fallibility.

In popular culture, works on cognitive and behavioural neuroscience such as those of Norman Doidge and Oliver Sacks are bestsellers, without forgetting the work of local broadcasters such as Natasha Mitchell on ABC Radio National's *All in the Mind*. BBC Radio 4 last year podcast Dr. Geoff Bunn's *A History of the Brain* in ten episodes. Such interest is widespread. There is everywhere the pop psychology of self-help books and gender blockbusters that seek to explain behaviour (women are apparently from Venus and can't read maps, men are emotionally stunted automatons etc.) alongside the portrayal of crude notions of mental structures in advertising (your 'rational side' vs your 'emotional side'). There's no new revelation about how the brain works without an advertising executive right behind, looking to use that knowledge the better to flog product. The way the brain influences what is nominally known as 'choice' increasingly fascinates behavioural economists, keen as they are to understand why human behaviour and rationality, much less fiscal rationality, do not always go hand in hand. Books sell by the truckload revealing the latest thinking around the nature of happiness, of rewards, of love, consciousness, memory, loneliness and general mental wellbeing, to name a few. What on earth would contemporary science have made of Wittgenstein?

Closer to home and more tellingly, there is the ever-increasing pattern of mental health

disturbance in Australian society. The annual cost of mental illness has been estimated at \$20 billion, which includes the cost of lost productivity and labour force participation. Mental disorders have been identified as the leading cause of healthy years of life lost due to disability. Depression, suicide and nervous disorders seem ever more frequent for amply documented but never entirely understood reasons, while a raft of more traditionally studied conditions such as epilepsy, dementia, Parkinson's, schizophrenia and bipolar disorders engage many of our top scientists.

In this respect, the work of the Mental Health Research Institute in Parkville is critical. Now recognised as a global leader in research that improves the lives of people affected by mental illness including psychotic illness and neurodegenerative diseases, its goal is to improve the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, and to develop preventive measures.

MHRI research includes the largest study of ageing and dementia looking at early detection techniques and lifestyle factors that could impact dementia; disease-modifying treatments for Alzheimer's disease; a better understanding of the molecular pathology of psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder,



to develop better biomarkers and treatments; and research into the causes of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression and the mechanism of action of drugs used to treat these disorders.

The Mental Health Research Institute is housed within the Melbourne Brain Centre, one of the world's most cited neuroscience research facilities.

Designed by Lyon Architects and constructed by Brookfield Multiplex, The Melbourne Brain Centre also houses the Florey Neuroscience Institutes and The University of Melbourne's Neuroscience Institute. Locating a diverse range of research disciplines into a highly collaborative environment was vital, according to Lyons director Neil Appleton.

"The brief was to create as open and interconnected facility as possible to aid the collaborative research

process," explained Appleton. "To build this level of collaboration into the design process, we established a collaborative architectural team which included representatives from the three co-locating research entities as well as a broad range of consultants, facility managers and the builder.

"This collaborative architectural process which involved design workshopping has resulted in a building which maximizes the ability to share ideas and resources, and maintains ultimate

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flexibility to accommodate changing research demands," he added.

"The architecture is there to support the science, creating an environment not separated by organisational or disciplinary structure. Shared and flexible laboratory areas, and shared lounge relaxation areas are integral to the collective design. There's much said about the rare Eureka breakthrough moments which happen in the lounges or around the coffee machine rather than in the laboratories."

Other brain conditions researched at the centre include Multiple Sclerosis, stroke, trauma, anxiety, epilepsy and Motor Neuron disease. The Parkville Centre also houses the Dax Centre, a unique art gallery exhibiting a collection of creative works by people with experience of mental illness and/or emotional trauma. And finally, the recently opened Readings bookshop, stocking books on neuroscience, psychology, and psychotherapy amongst general fiction and non-fiction, reflecting, once again, the tremendous popular thirst for engagement with the workings of the mind.

The design, construction and specialist fit-out of facilities has been funded through significant assistance from the Federal Government of Australia, the Victorian Government, the University of Melbourne, the Ian Potter Foundation, the Myer Foundation and family and a range of other benefactors.

## INFORMATION

The Mental Health Research Institute is located at 30 Royal Parade, Parkville.

[mhri.edu.au](http://mhri.edu.au)  
[florey.edu.au/about-florey/about-us/melbourne-brain-centre](http://florey.edu.au/about-florey/about-us/melbourne-brain-centre)  
[readings.com.au/the-brain-centre](http://readings.com.au/the-brain-centre)  
[daxcentre.org](http://daxcentre.org)



## Our new shop at the Brain Centre is now open

Readings has just opened a new bookshop in the Brain Centre at the University of Melbourne. Browse and buy the best new books on neuroscience, psychology, psychotherapy, general non-fiction, fiction as well as bargain books and stationery. And don't forget, we offer students 10% off all full-priced course-related books at our shops on presentation of a valid student ID card.

**Readings** BOOKS MUSIC FILM  
 MELBOURNE'S OWN SINCE 1967

### Readings at the Brain Centre

Kenneth Myer Building, University of Melbourne, 30 Royal Parade, Parkville, 3052.  
 Open Mon–Fri, 9am–5pm. Ph. 03 9347 1749. email [braincentre@readings.com.au](mailto:braincentre@readings.com.au)