



Breaking down barriers and saving lives

WITH over 95 million members and volunteers, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent are the largest humanitarian organisations in the world.

Since 1914, the Australian branch of the Red Cross has been looking after people in times of accidents and natural disasters, such as Cyclone Larry. The Australian Red Cross Blood Service (ARCBS) is one part of this large body that plays a vital role in helping Australians who require a range of blood products.

For the ARCBS, knowledge management is about more than improving efficiencies - it is about saving lives.

To this end, on March 8 and 9, leading Sydney research centre, the Garvan Institute, hosted the ARCBS's first national Knowledge Management Conference. The program showcased how knowledge management can leverage innovation agendas in the health and research environment. The conference drew more than 115 delegates, with many coming from Japan, Pakistan, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Canada and the US.

According to BioMed North's chief executive officer, Dr Deborah Kuchler: "Unlocking innovation is one way of getting more 'bang for the buck' in the health system."

The 15 keynote speakers included a who's who of the international knowledge management world.

Finland's Professor Karl-Eric Sveiby presented cutting edge research on

organisational culture and collaboration.

From a survey of almost 3000 employees drawn from both the public and private sectors, he characterised the 10 most commonly identified barriers to sharing knowledge.

Most barriers related to inefficient systems and poor information flow, particularly between management and their staff. From the esteemed Harvard Business School, Professor Dorothy Leonard gave a dynamic presentation into the value of "Deep Smarts".

This, she explained, is the human expertise that consists of practical wisdom and intuitive knowledge gained through experience. By illustrating the lecture with a series of anecdotes, she showed the delegates why recognising and cultivating this wisdom is a critical part of any leader's role.

The ARCBS's own Beverley Cummings highlighted the importance of "seeing where people walk before building a path".

She also provided a snapshot of the knowledge-based strategies and projects being employed by the ARCBS. Each of the 15 presentations reinforced the theory that effective gathering and dissemination of knowledge results in benefits that far outweigh the original investment.

"Money is the language of business, but knowledge is the language of people working in a vital industry like the health sector, because knowledge is needed to save lives," Dr Kuchler says.

The conference was so successful that the ARCBS is looking at repeating it next year.

