

Searle is last man standing

LIVIA ALBECK-RIPKA

CHAIRMAN of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission John Searle (pictured) was the last man



standing after his fellow board members quit en masse following the rejection by Attorney-General Robert Clark of their unanimous nomination for commissioner.

Following the resignation of two other board members earlier this month, Carolyn Creswell, Brendon Gale and Paula Gerber all tendered their resignations this week when their choice for the top job was vetoed by the Attorney-General. It's unclear who the nominee was.

Professor Kuruvilla George also resigned in May 2012 amid controversy surrounding his endorsement of a submission opposing same-sex marriage by Doctors for the Family.

Searle, who was hand-picked by Clark, said he was disappointed at the upheaval.

"I gave the issue some consideration, but I was of the view that I've undertaken a commitment to the Commission and to the people of Victoria ... it's my intention to fulfil that commitment," he said.

The role of commissioner has been vacant since Helen Szoke stepped down in 2011. Karen Toohey has been acting commissioner since that time.

In a joint statement, the resigning board members expressed their disappointment with the decision.

"We see the Attorney-General's refusal to accept the recommendation of all seven board members as evidence of his lack of confidence in the board's ability to perform its statutory duty, and therefore consider it appropriate to step aside so that the Attorney can appoint a new board in which he does have confidence," the statement read, while noting their confidence in the staff to continue with the day-to-day work of the Commission.

Searle echoed this sentiment. "The day-to-day operations of the Commission are not affected by the resignations and the Commission will continue to perform its functions at its customary high level," he said.

Medical collaboration body launched

PETER KOHN

MEDICAL researchers have indicated strong interest in collaborative efforts between Australia and Israel on several key projects, according to a visiting Israeli health specialist.

Professor Shlomo Mor-Yosef, who recently completed his tenure as director-general of the Hadassah Medical Organisation (HMO) in Jerusalem, was in Australia this week to launch AUSiMED, an organisation that will foster these joint medical projects through grants.

The Israeli visitor, who chairs Israel's National Institute for Health Policy, met researchers and public officials to discuss future projects that span Israeli and Australian medical know-how across a number of hospitals and research centres.

Applied medical research – unlike high technology – has long, expensive development cycles, Mor-Yosef told *The AJN*. "In high-tech, it can take a couple of years and \$1 million before you know if you've succeeded or failed. In medical research, it can take many years and a far greater investment."

Mor-Yosef visited Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra, and was scheduled to meet Monash University medical researchers, federal Health



Professor Shlomo Mor-Yosef launched AUSiMED in Australia this week.

Minister Tanya Plibersek and NSW Governor Marie Bashir – as well as representatives of Jewish community support groups for the Weizmann Institute, Technion and Hadassah.

"Israelis are more risk-takers than Australians," he said, although he acknowledged that both countries have a great tradition of medical research.

AUSiMED's executive director Ros Kaldor-Aroni told *The AJN* the organisation has channelled almost \$1 million into projects ranging from the use of embryonic stem cells to treat multiple sclerosis, to cooperation between the Centre for Community Child Health at Melbourne's Royal

Children's Hospital and hospitals in Israel. "AUSiMED currently has an impressive list of projects that have been approved for funding. Each of these projects is at the cutting edge of medical and scientific research," she said.

The initiative began in 2004 when then Victorian premier Steve Bracks visited Hadassah Medical Centre in Jerusalem, one of the world's leading centres of healing, teaching and research. The focus of his visit was to study mass-casualty trauma management: specifically how Hadassah had developed strategies for terrorism and natural mass-casualty events.

An outcome of the visit was a decision by the Victorian government to fund a bilateral collaboration between The Alfred Hospital, the state's designated mass-casualty centre, and Hadassah. This initial collaboration became the genesis for AUSiMED.

Over the next two years, teams of specialists travelled between Israel and Australia, developing enhanced protocols for The Alfred's mass-casualty trauma management. The new protocols were successfully implemented during the time of Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires in February 2009.

AUSiMED seeks Israeli-Australian cooperation in fields such as stem-cell therapy and its effects on multiple sclerosis, early childhood health, therapies for trauma management in children and adolescents, containing future flu pandemics, blood-based testing for brain tumours, and monitoring the quality of stored red blood cells.

During his time at HMO, Mor-Yosef initiated a unique program for young specialists in training to have free time for research.

AUSiMED's patrons include Bracks, Mor-Yosef, clinical researcher Professor David Cooper, molecular biologist Professor Suzanne Cory and former Victorian governor Professor David de Kretser.

New law to save chaplaincy program

ADAM KAMIEN

THE Gillard government introduced urgent legislation on Tuesday to ensure the survival of the school chaplaincy program, following a landmark ruling from the High Court last week that deemed it constitutionally invalid.

Attorney-General Nicola Roxon briefed the Opposition, Greens and independents on the new law, which was expected to pass through Parliament unopposed on Wednesday as *The AJN* went to print.

The Coalition threw its support behind the move, despite concerns over the lack of a sunset clause it said would give the government more time to perfect the legislation.

The government's hand was forced after the High Court found the Commonwealth had exceeded its funding powers in bankrolling the national school chaplaincy program, which has benefited many Jewish schools around the country since its inception in 2007.

In a speech to Parliament, Roxon said the government was "committed" to saving the program.

"The programs supported by the bill include the National School Chaplaincy and Student Welfare Program," Roxon said. "This program is widely supported for its assistance for students. The government is committed to maintaining the funding for the chaplaincy program.

"This is a prudent approach in the light of the new requirement identified by the High Court, and it is designed to ensure administrative certainty."

Roy Steinman, principal of Leibler Yavneh College and chairman of the Victorian Chapter of the Association of Principals of Jewish Day Schools, said the program's reprieve was welcome news.

"We are delighted that the Commonwealth government has introduced legislation into Parliament that will enable the chaplaincy program to continue," Steinman said.

"Our schools fully utilise the funding to enhance the delivery of pastoral care in our schools.

"The program assists our school communities in supporting the spiritual, social, and emotional wellbeing of our students," Steinman said.

"This often includes the support and guidance of our students in ethical matters, values, relationships and Jewish spirituality. The program has been a success and ensures the successful engagement with the broader community."

The fate of the program was unclear last week after the High Court upheld a challenge from a Queensland man, who argued the program was constitutionally invalid. He also contended that the program violated religious freedom, a charge the court summarily dismissed.