Sydney played host to the 22nd International Symposium on Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis/Motor Neuron Disease (ALS/MND), bringing to our shores vast experience and knowledge from the experts in ALS/MND research. Before the Symposium had officially begun, there was an earlier session entitled 'Ask the experts,' in which the general public, in particular family and friends of those living with ALS/MND were invited to listen to presentations from world renown ALS/MND research experts. After the experts presented their work, the audience as well as an online streaming audience had the opportunity to directly ask questions to the experts. This was a truly fantastic and insightful opportunity for me to understand key issues faced by people living with the condition, their family members, friends and carers.

The Symposium was officially opened by a representative of the Gadigal tribe who welcomed the attendees with a didgeridoo and a song and dance that in its own right was a highlight. After the President of MND Australia, Ralph Warren, gave his address the opening session was underway with talks on differences in disease phenotypes and genetic factors underlying ALS/MND pathobiology. After the opening session, the Symposium was structured into 2-3 parallel sessions mainly dividing the oral presentations into either clinical or biological research.

Some of the highlights were discussed in the sessions on 'Pathobiology of ALS/MND', 'Neuroimaging', 'Target Pathways and Therapeutic Strategies', and 'Disease Models.' In particular in the session on disease models, the use of stem cells was elegantly discussed by Dr Kevin Eggan of Harvard Stem Cell Institute, USA, who described how his research team can take skin cells from ALS/MND patients and transform them into
motor neurons to use as an in vitro disease model. Dr Eggan used caution to say that these models should not replace the other models currently available, rather they should be used to supplement them in order to study the motor neurons in a functioning environment. Dr Eggan’s groundbreaking work was insightful and offered renewed hope of an understanding of this disease.

Another highlight was the presentation by Dr Bryan Traynor of the National Institutes of Health, USA. Dr Traynor gave one of the concluding presentations of the conference in which he inspired the audience by discussing the pioneering work his extensive research team had conducted. They were able to discover an important novel gene called C9ORF72 at fault in up to 40% of certain ALS/MND patients. Dr Traynor discussed how his team targeted geographically clustered patient populations in Wales, Finland and the Netherlands and by looking at a specific region of genome that was previously thought to not be important in disease pathology. Dr Traynor’s team unearthed an expansion in the C9ORF72 gene that is up to 250 times bigger in ALS/MND patients. Moreover, this prodigious discovery is ‘hot off the press’ as it was only published in the last two months.

On a more personal level, as a first year PhD student this was the first International Symposium I had attended and not only was I lucky enough to be able to share the knowledge that each presenter offered but I also had the opportunity to discuss my own work. My poster presentation was entitled 'Spatial characterization of motor neuron columns supplying the rat forelimb' and, throughout the 2-hour long poster session, I received an impressive response from researchers using animal models that were based in both Australia and USA. My poster described the precise anatomical location of the motor end plates and motor neurons that innervate several muscles in the rat forelimb. This work is of benefit to both ALS/MND and spinal cord injury research as it can be used as therapeutic targets for rat models of either motor dysfunction condition. This work was also recently published in the journal *Neuroscience*. 
Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Spinal Cord Injury Network for allowing me the opportunity to share my work and to develop as a young researcher. Without this support, I would not have been able to present my work, discuss my findings with like-minded researchers and indulge myself in the exciting and promising avenue that ALS/MND research offers, a field that complements my interest in spinal cord injury and repair.