

Australian  
of the Year  
**➤ Awards**  
2020 *Celebrating 60 years*

**MEDIA RELEASE**  
**25 JANUARY 2020**

## **2020 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS ANNOUNCED**

**2020 Australian of the Year – Dr James Muecke AM (SA)**  
**2020 Senior Australian of the Year – Professor John Newnham AM (WA)**  
**2020 Young Australian of the Year – Ash Barty (QLD)**  
**2020 Australia's Local Hero – Bernie Shakeshaft (NSW)**

**8:55pm, Canberra:** An eye surgeon working to prevent blindness, an obstetrician leading the world in the prevention of pre-term birth, the world's No.1 ranked women's tennis player and an advocate for disadvantaged rural youth are the 2020 Australians of the Year.

The Prime Minister, The Hon Scott Morrison MP, presented the Australian of the Year Award recipients with trophies at a ceremony at the National Arboretum in Canberra this evening.

As this year marks 60 years of the Australian of the Year Awards program, many former award recipients were in the audience at this evening's event, including 2018 Local Hero Eddie Woo, 2015 Australian of the Year Rosie Batty, 2013 Australian of the Year Ita Buttrose AO OBE, 1983 Australian of the Year Robert de Castella MBE, and 1964 Australian of the Year Dawn Fraser AO MBE.

**Dr James Muecke AM of Adelaide, South Australia was named 2020 Australian of the Year** for his work preventing blindness. Since starting his medical career in Kenya, 56-year-old Dr James Muecke AM has been passionate about fighting blindness. His focus now is the leading cause of blindness in adults – type 2 diabetes – a spiralling epidemic that's impacting nearly one-in-ten Australians. It's the fastest growing cause of vision loss in Aboriginal people and the sixth-biggest killer in this country. James wants to challenge our perception of sugar and the impact it has in the development of type 2 diabetes. Previously, James co-founded Vision Myanmar at the South Australian Institute of Ophthalmology in 2000. The \$1 million program has developed and operated eye health and blindness initiatives in Myanmar. Inspired by this program's success, James also co-founded Sight For All, a social impact organisation aiming to create a world where everyone can see. With 80% of world blindness avoidable – and almost 90% in poor countries – James treats blindness as a human rights issue.

**The 2020 Senior Australian of the Year is 67-year-old obstetrics specialist Professor John Newnham AM of Perth, Western Australia.** John Newnham is recognised as one of the world's leading authorities in the prevention of pre-term birth – the single greatest cause of death and disability in children up to five years of age. A Professor of Obstetrics, John has been instrumental in making Western Australia an international hotspot for research and clinical excellence in pregnancy and life before birth. In 1989, he founded and led the pioneering Raine Study, the world's first and most enduring pregnancy-focused lifetime cohort project. John developed a program for preventing preterm birth – a pioneering initiative which resulted in an 8% reduction in premature births across WA. After a successful national rollout in 2018, he founded the Australian Preterm Birth Prevention Alliance – the world's first ever national program of its kind. John has been described by the world's leading scientific journal as 'an intellectual leader of modern obstetrics who has changed the practice of medicine and the lives of women and infants'.

**The 2020 Young Australian of the Year is 23-year-old tennis player Ash Barty of Ipswich, Queensland.** Professional tennis player Ash Barty inspires legions of fans with her dynamic tennis game, formidable serve and down-to-earth attitude. The former cricketer and teen tennis champion is ranked the world's number one singles tennis player by the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) – only the second Australian WTA singles number one after Evonne Goolagong Cawley. As an adult, Ash has won six singles titles on the WTA Tour, including one Grand Slam singles title at the 2019 French Open. She also sits in the top 20 of doubles players and was a doubles runner up for the Australian Open at the age of just 16. She achieved one Grand Slam doubles title at the 2018 US Open with partner CoCo Vandeweghe. Ash also delighted fans around the world with her calm good-humoured acceptance of just missing out on reaching the 2019 Wimbledon quarter-finals. A First Nations woman, Ash serves as the National Indigenous Tennis Ambassador for Tennis Australia.

**The 2020 Australia's Local Hero award was presented to youth advocate Bernie Shakeshaft of Armidale, NSW.** After seeing the plight of disadvantaged youth in his community, Bernie Shakeshaft decided to take action. Starting in 2006 with a shed and an idea, Bernie founded the BackTrack Youth Works Program, turning around the lives of some of Australia's most vulnerable kids. Using the skills he developed growing up and as a jackaroo in the Northern Territory learning from the Aboriginal trackers, Bernie developed an award-winning program that uses animal-assisted learning, agricultural skills and a residential facility. He and his extraordinary team have helped more than 1,000 children reconnect with their education, training, families and community, offering them love and support to live out their hopes and dreams. The BackTrack program, now the subject of a documentary, Backtrack Boys, has the support of magistrates, police and mayors. It has helped decrease Armidale's youth crime rate by more than 38 per cent, saving millions of dollars and keeping children out of correctional systems. Fifty-two-year-old Bernie's kind, effective approach is life changing and inspiring.

Chair of the National Australia Day Council, Danielle Roche OAM, congratulated the 2020 Australian of the Year Award recipients and highlighted their unique contributions.

"The 2020 Australians of the Year reflect the many ways in which Australians achieve and contribute," Ms Roche said.

"Dr James Muecke's passionate and selfless commitment to preventing blindness here at home and around the world is literally changing lives. He is a fierce advocate at the forefront of the fight against the rising epidemic of diabetes-induced blindness.

"Professor John Newnham's lifetime of research has saved many thousands of infant lives and leads global practice improving the health of millions of women and babies.

"Ash Barty is the world's No.1 tennis player, a champion athlete and an extraordinary young woman doing our nation proud. Her achievements are inspiring young Australians to follow their dreams.

"Bernie Shakeshaft took the initiative to help and support young people in need, helping to build stronger individuals, communities and futures at the same time.

"Our 2020 Australians of the Year are great examples of the Australian spirit – people who saw a problem and decided to take it upon themselves to solve it, unsung heroes working to make a difference, champions who have risen to the top through sheer commitment and hard work, and those lending a helping hand where it's needed most."

Dr James Muecke AM, Professor John Newnham AM and Bernie Shakeshaft will attend the National Flag Raising and Citizenship Ceremony in Canberra on Australia Day morning, Sunday 26 January 2020. They will then appear at the Sydney Australia Day celebrations at Circular Quay.

Nominations for the 2021 Australian of the Year are now open. If there's someone you think should be considered, you can nominate them now at [australianoftheyear.org.au](http://australianoftheyear.org.au).

## **ENDS.**

**Bio** details for recipients attached with this media release – *see following pages*

**For further media information on the 2020 Australian of the Year Awards please contact:**

Nicole Browne      0414 673 762

**Follow Award announcements as they happen:**

Twitter: @ausoftheyear

Australian of the Year Facebook page: facebook.com/AustralianoftheYear

**TV Vision:** ABCTV will provide an ABC bugged digital feed of the Awards event for news reporting purposes - available live from 7.30pm via ABCTV on Saturday 25 January 2020 - please contact Master Control at ABCTV Sydney on 02 8333 1620 with any queries.

**Photos:** Photos of the 2020 Awards recipients will be available for download after 9:30pm 25 January 2020 at:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/9a31rlqe2r6m35x/AAD6jPB1ei6vvTF7nTXocrmUa?dl=0>

**Notes:**

- The 2020 Australian of the Year, Senior Australian of the Year and Australia's Local Hero will be at the National Flag Raising and Citizenship Ceremony in Canberra 9:00am-10:00am Sunday 26 January 2020. Please note interview access during Sunday 26 January 2020 can be limited due to travel and function commitments.
- 2020 Young Australian of the Year Ash Barty will be competing in the Australian Open in Melbourne. Media access to Ash will be through her management and the Australian Open media arrangements.

**For more information on the Australian of the Year Awards visit [australianoftheyear.org.au](http://australianoftheyear.org.au)**

**2020 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR**

**NAME:** DR JAMES MUECKE AM

Date of birth: 23 May, 1963

Lives: Norwood, Adelaide, South Australia

Place of birth: Adelaide

Occupation: Self-employed Ophthalmologist  
Volunteer at Sight For All

Education: Canberra Grammar (1981)  
Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery - Adelaide University (1988)

Achievements/  
Accolades: Adelaide University Vice-Chancellor's Alumni Award 2019  
Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology 'Outstanding service to  
prevention of blindness' Award 2011  
South Australian Community Achievement Award 2013  
Ernst & Young Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2015

## 2020 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

**NAME:** PROFESSOR JOHN NEWNHAM AM

Date of birth: 10 March, 1952

Lives: Perth, Western Australia

Place of birth: Western Australia

Occupation: Head of the University of Western Australia Division of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (based at King Edward Memorial Hospital)  
Chief Scientific Director of the Women and Infants Research Foundation  
Adjunct Professor at Peking University, Beijing

Education: Christ Church Grammar School, WA (1969)  
University of Western Australia (1975)

Achievements/  
Accolades: The John Newnham Oration given at the Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand DOHaD Society, 2015 onwards  
Convenor of the World Congress held in Perth 2007  
Chairman of the Perinatal and Infant Mortality and Maternal Mortality Committees of the Health Department of Western Australian 2001 to present  
Gold Medal, Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecologists UK 1991  
Inaugural member of the International DOHaD Society

## 2020 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

**NAME:** ASH BARTY

Date of birth: 24 April, 1996

Lives: Springfield, Ipswich, Queensland

Place of birth: Ipswich, Queensland

Occupation: Professional tennis player

Education: Woodcrest State College (2014)

Achievements/  
Accolades: Won Wimbledon girls' singles titles 2011 at age 15  
WTA debut at Brisbane Internationals 2012  
Made World top 100 in 2017 (world number 92)  
Won first Grand Slam title with US player CoCo Vandeweghe in US Open  
doubles 2018  
Won first Grand Slam singles title at the French Open 2019  
Reached career-high singles ranking of world number 1 on 24 June 2019,  
becoming just the second Australian woman to reach number one after  
Evonne Goolagong Cawley in 1976.  
(note: Evonne Goolagong Cawley was 1971 Australian of the Year)  
Presented with Sports Australia Hall of Fame 'The Don' Award 2019

## 2020 AUSTRALIA'S LOCAL HERO

<b>NAME:</b>	<b>BERNIE SHAKESHAFT</b>
Date of birth:	5 September, 1967
Lives:	Armidale, NSW
Place of birth:	Darlinghurst, Sydney NSW
Occupation:	Founder & CEO, BackTrack Youth Works
Education:	Marist Brothers, Eastwood NSW (1985)
Achievements/ Accolades:	Recipient 2014 Churchill Scholarship Author, Back On Track