

# The woman who took on the world – and won.

*At school her teachers thought she couldn't be taught. But Ute Vollmer-Conna has proved them wrong. After stints as a carpenter and physiotherapist, the monocle-wearing, scooter-riding "loose cannon" has gone on to forge a stellar career in medical research. She spoke to Susi Hamilton.*

**I** didn't do very well at school in Germany and left when I was only 15. I went into carpentry, which was a bit chauvinistic in the early 1970s – I was the only woman doing it. I liked sport and people, so I ended up being accepted to do physiotherapy. I did that for four or five years and then migrated to Australia.

When I came here, it was like rocks had been lifted off me. I just seemed to fit in. In Germany, people in the street used to come up and ask if what I was wearing was a statement. They would actually seem quite angry. I had a very boyish figure and the Germans often got confused – sometimes girls even asked me to dance! When I got to Australia in the early 1980s, people suddenly thought I was gorgeous, fun and interesting! At first I thought it was some kind of a joke. But I could finally just be myself and that was OK, even desirable. It was liberating!

When I got here, my English was wobbly. I started looking in the classifieds for work and I noticed a whole list under "ute" – my name. Next to it were phrases such as "beautiful body, going cheap". I finally worked out what a ute was! As I was a trained physiotherapist, I ended up looking for work as a masseur at a "health club" in the Cross. I must have been a bit slow because it took me a while to work out what the clients expected. I left straight away.

In Australia there was the opportunity to start again. Even though I didn't have the equivalent of an HSC, I was able to do a science degree. I liked the undergraduate work and did a PhD in psychoimmunology. When I went back to Germany recently, I gave a series of lectures. One of my former teachers really wanted to meet me because he was so surprised to hear what I had done. All the teachers had thought I was a hopeless student, but then so was Einstein ...

Psycho-neuroimmunology, which is the field in which I now work, extends from the fascination between the mind and the body. It looks at the question of whether the brain talks to the body or vice versa. My interest is what happens to the brain when the body is sick. When people get ill with an infection such as glandular fever, they get headaches, bodily aches and pains, poor concentration, no appetite and they need to sleep. That reaction is triggered by the immune response but mediated by the brain. We wanted to know why some people who are affected by a virus get really ill, while others affected by the same virus only get ill for a day or two and then recover. We found that genes are a big influence. How vigorously your immune system fights the virus determines how sick you are going to get.

I love teaching. My students are an inspiration to me. They teach me to never stop questioning, to keep up the enthusiasm and we teach each other the value of a good laugh. As Mark Twain said: "Never let formal education get in the way of your learning." I am also a student counsellor. My students ask me questions about life the universe and everything – just as much as about their studies. That's why I have a couch and a box of tissues in my office.

**TV** An interview with Ute Vollmer-Conna can be seen on the Health channel of UNSWTV at [www.tv.unsw.edu.au](http://www.tv.unsw.edu.au).