

16 November 2020

Viertel Foundation Awards \$4.09m to medical research

Three medical researchers have been awarded one of Australia's largest philanthropic medical research grants – a Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellowship to fund their work in combatting the effects of brain damage and developing interventions to support our genes to fight diseases such as cancer and chronic pain over the next five years.

The 2020 Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellows, who will each receive \$1.25 million over five years to support their work, are:

1. **Dr Jana Vukovic** – The University of Queensland
2. **Associate Professor Chen Davidovich** – Monash University

With additional funds secured from two other philanthropic trusts managed by Equity Trustees, The Cross Family and The Frank Alexander Charitable Trusts, an additional fellowship was awarded this year to **Dr Michelle Halls** (Monash University). The third fellowship became available when a 2019 research project did not proceed when the research leader moved to a new position.

A further four medical researchers have been awarded one-year grants to continue their work.

Since establishment, the Viertel Foundation has awarded a total of 55 Senior Medical Research Fellowships and 139 Clinical Investigator awards, ensuring important medical and health conditions, and the treatments for them, can be researched.

"If there has ever been a time when the importance of medical research has been fully appreciated, that time is now during this year as we all silently cheer on the medical research teams around the world who are working right now therapies and treatments for COVID-19," said Jodi Kennedy, General Manager of Charitable Trusts and Philanthropy at Equity Trustees.

"As one of the largest philanthropic funders of medical research in Australia, we are always working with the sector to ensure our funding decisions can make the biggest impact in the health challenges we have now – and ahead of us. That is the power of the legacy left by Sylvia and Charles Viertel just over 25 years ago."

In addition, four \$85,000 one-year clinical investigator awards were provided to:

1. Associate Professor Chishan Nalliah, Macquarie University
2. Dr Johnathan Kaufman, Western Health
3. Dr Jessica Day, The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research
4. Dr Benedict Costello, Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute

Professor Peter Leedman, Chairman of the Viertel Foundation's Medical Advisory Board, said the candidates for 2020 exhibited what had become the hallmark of all Viertel Foundation applicants: exceptional quality and dedication.

"It is always difficult to make a decision about which projects we can fund each year. I congratulate this year's successful fellows and clinical investigators – but want all applicants to know that their work, and their talent, was inspiring for everyone on the Advisory Board. Australia is fortunate to have this level of talent in our medical research community," Professor Leedman said.

The Viertel Foundation is managed in partnership with co-trustees Justice Debra Mullins AO (Chair), Rex Freudenberg and Paul de Silva, and is one of Australia's largest charitable foundations, distributing around \$7.5 million annually.

More about the Sylvia and Charles Viertel Foundation is available [here](#).



FELLOWSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARIES

Dr Jana Vukovic
School of Biomedical Sciences and Queensland Brain Institute
The University of Queensland



Acquired brain injury by trauma, stroke, or infection are leading causes of ongoing disability worldwide. The consequences of injury can include learning and memory difficulties, epilepsy, depression and dementia. Whatever the initial cause of the damage, there can be ongoing (secondary) effects can result in further brain dysfunction. Dr Vukovic's work has found a way to prevent or limit these secondary events by targeting the brain's immune cells – microglia. Over the next five years of the Viertel Fellowship, she and her team will further investigate how the microglia can be engaged to promote repair and improve brain function after injury. Ultimately, this work could lead to new therapeutic strategies to combat cognitive dysfunction.

Associate Professor Chen Davidovich
[Monash Biomedicine Discovery Institute](#)
Cancer Program, the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology
Monash University



During normal development, thousands of genes are switched off. These genes are then maintained repressed for up to our entire lifetime. Polycomb repressive complexes (PRCs) maintain the repressed state of thousands of cell type-specific genes and are essential for normal development. In disease, including in cancers and autoimmune diseases, repressed genes become abnormally active. When PRCs become inactive or too active during disease, abnormal gene expression often leads to a poor outcome for the patient. This project aims to open a path for new therapeutic opportunities to target PRCs and allow them to perform their task effectively again.

Dr Michelle Halls
Drug Discovery Biology Theme, Monash Institute of Pharmaceutical
Sciences
Monash University



The human genome encodes more than 800 G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs). They are involved in nearly all biological processes and are the targets of 50-60% of all drugs. GPCRs are mostly found on the surface of cells where they detect a diverse range of stimuli (such as light, odours, hormones). GPCRs convert this information into a "cellular barcode" which directs the cell to perform functions that enable sight, smell, movement or energy production. In disease, GPCRs often change both their location in a cell and how they interact with other proteins. For example, in chronic pain and cancer some GPCRs are no longer at the cell surface but are found inside the cell where they sit next to different proteins. This project aims to enable the development of more effective drugs with fewer side effects by fixing the incorrect cellular barcodes that are generated following a disease-dependent change in GPCR location.

MEDIA INQUIRIES

Alicia Kokocinski
General Manager – Marketing & Communications
03 8623 5396 / 0403 172 024
akokocinski@eqt.com.au

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