

15 November 2021

Viertel Foundation Awards \$4.2m to medical research

\$3.75 million has been awarded to three mid-career Australian researchers through the prestigious annual Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation Senior Medical Research Fellowships in association with Bellberry.

A further \$450,000 was awarded in one-year grants to an additional five medical researchers.

In 2021 fellowship grants will support work over five years in the areas of cardiovascular disease and links to gut health, dementia diagnosis and regenerative therapies.

The 2021 Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellows, who will each receive \$1.25 million over five years to support their work, are:

1. Associate Professor Francine Marques - Monash University
2. Dr James **"Mac"** Shine - University of Sydney - (Bellberry-Viertel Fellowship)
3. Associate Professor Mikaël Martino - Monash University

In addition, five \$90,000 one-year clinical investigator awards were provided to:

1. Dr Fana Alemseged - University of Melbourne
2. Associate Professor Edward Smith - Melbourne Health
3. Dr Matthew Roberts - The University of Queensland
4. Dr Emma Foster - Monash University
5. Dr Carlos Garcia Esperon - The University of Newcastle

Since establishment, the Viertel Foundation has awarded a total of 58 Senior Medical Research Fellowships and 144 Clinical Investigator awards, ensuring important medical and health conditions, and the treatments for them, can be researched.

"In 2021, few can argue that we owe a debt of gratitude to the medical research community," said Jodi Kennedy, General Manager of Charitable Trusts and Philanthropy at Equity Trustees. "These past few years show just what can be achieved when we direct concentrated support to achieve a result in combatting a major health crisis.

"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 25 years ago."

Bellberry CEO, Kylie Sproston, said that the fellowships provide a rare opportunity for mid-career researchers to focus on specific areas of research that show great promise.

"We are delighted that Dr James "Mac" Shine is the Bellberry-Viertel Fellow for 2021. Dementia affects millions of people around the world, and we are proud to support him in his ground-breaking research," said Ms Sproston.

Professor Peter Leedman, Chairman of the Viertel Foundation's Medical Advisory Board, said the candidates for 2021 exhibited the hallmark of all Viertel Foundation applicants: exceptional quality and dedication.

"Our congratulations go not just to the recipients of this year's awards, but to all applicants who presented their impressive work to the Advisory Board. Each year we are impressed by what is being achieved by the Australian medical research community. We are proud to play a part in developing this extraordinary pool of talent and ensuring this important work continues," 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, established with an initial bequest of approximately \$60 million. Today the Foundation is worth around \$215 million and distributes around \$8 million annually.

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

FELLOWSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARIES

Associate Professor Francine Marques
Monash University



Targeting the gut microbiota to prevent and treat cardiovascular disease.

Diets high in fibre are linked with lower blood pressure and rates of heart disease. Until recently, however, we did not understand why or how. I discovered that this phenomenon involves our gut microbiome. While our bodies are incapable of digesting fibre, they feed the community of intestinal microbes. This results in the release of substances I have shown to lower blood pressure and improve heart function in experimental models. My fellowship will delineate how I will leverage this knowledge to discover, develop and translate new ways to prevent and treat high blood pressure via the gut microbiome.

Dr James "Mac" Shine
University of Sydney (Bellberry-Viertel Fellowship)



Unleashing the power of brain imaging to understand and treat dementia.

Dementia affects more than 50 million people worldwide, with cases projected to triple by 2050. To diminish the burden of this disease, we need a better conception of the healthy brain – only then will we appreciate what it means for a brain to develop dementia. I will use state-of-the-art brain imaging and sophisticated computer models to characterise the role of the ascending arousal system – a crucial site of pathology in dementia. This perspective will improve our ability to diagnose dementia at earlier stages, and to more effectively intervene to alleviate the symptoms of this debilitating disease.

Associate Professor Mikaël Martino
Monash University



Towards the development of novel immune-centric regenerative strategies.

Regenerative medicine has the potential to address some of the biggest challenges in healthcare. However, this field is still in its infancy – for example, there is still limited adoption of regenerative therapies based on stem cells. My work is in developing new promising approaches to design the next generation of regenerative strategies. Particularly, I will focus on growth factor/cytokine technologies and on the critical role of the immune system during tissue repair and regeneration. Indeed, using the immune system is probably the most effective way to promote tissue regeneration.

MEDIA INQUIRIES

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