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Innovative mobile hepatitis C clinic receives funding as Australia drives towards elimination of the disease by 2030

- \$300,000 grant money split across seven exciting new research projects throughout Australia which often struggle to secure funding or face high competition
- Unique clinic aiming to treat some of the hardest-to-reach populations, is one of the recipients of a grant from the 2020 Gilead Australia Fellowship awards
- Research into the impact of HIV on ageing and a project which measures the efficacy of treatments for IBD amongst other research projects awarded part of the \$300,000 grant

Melbourne, 12 March 2020 – Gilead Sciences ANZ has today announced the winners of its 2020 Gilead Fellowship Research Grants Program, with the seven recipient projects focused on improving patient outcomes in HIV, liver diseases, invasive fungal infections, haematological malignancies and inflammatory diseases.

One of the winning projects will be aiming to create a new mobile medical centre to treat hepatitis C (HCV) in high-risk patient populations, to support the elimination of the disease in Australia.

Andrew Pfeffer, a Clinical Consultant Pharmacist and a Director of Pharmaceutical Research Services in Logan Queensland, runs a private addiction medicine clinic and is seeking to fill this important gap in the targeting and treatment of HCV.

“Research shows that around 30% of people in custody in Australia have HCV. This figure increases to 60% in individuals who use drugs. This makes those coming out of correctional facilities an important cohort if Australia wants to play its part to achieve elimination.” said Pfeffer.

“Currently Queensland health services do quite a lot for those in custody, but there isn’t anyone catching them when they are leaving, or newly out in the community. We hope to close this gap in care. One of our goals is to upskill Parole and Probation officers to screen and engage their clients to be tested and treated for Hep C.

“In Logan (Brisbane South PHN), we have the fifth highest prevalence of HCV amongst Australian health districts, with the third lowest treatment uptake rate. The Gilead Fellowship funding is such an important step to help us reach those who wouldn’t access treatment or testing otherwise.”

Pfeffer’s mobile clinic also aims to address the prevalence of HCV among other high-risk populations including those with a history of injecting drugs.

While Australia has led the way globally to reach the WHO’s 2030 elimination target, an estimated 180,000 Australians are still living with treatable HCV causing over 600 preventable deaths from liver cancer and liver failure every year.¹

Dr Paul Slade, Country Medical Director of Gilead Sciences ANZ says, “At Gilead we are driven by a desire to help patients in need through ground-breaking research and innovation. This year’s recipients of the 2020 Fellowship Research Grants are exciting standout projects that we believe will



make a big difference in the quality of lives of patients across the country. We are proud to recognise these projects and provide them with support to help meet their goals.”

“I’m really excited to be a recipient of the Gilead Fellowship Grant – I think we could really make a difference to patients’ quality of life by making the test that we’re trialling more accessible” says Miles Sparrow, whose research project will be to test in clinic the feasibility of rapid testing for fecal biomarkers and therapeutic drug monitoring.

“Without the grant, we couldn’t do this project – the current tests that we’re trying to replace are cumbersome, costly and slow, and for sick patients who are desperate for effective treatment a test that turns around a result on the same day could make a real difference.”

The full list of winners of the 2020 Gilead Fellowship Research Grants Program are:

- **Kieran Mulroney** at the University of Western Australia for research to provide fast and accurate diagnostic tests for invasive fungal infections, as confirmation of infection is important to determine treatment and timing of medicine.
- **Miles Sparrow** at Alfred Health for research into developing rapid, point of care testing for therapeutic drug monitoring and fecal biomarker testing in inflammatory bowel disease.
- **Nila Dharan** at UNSW Sydney’s Kirby Institute for a study evaluating and comparing aging and quality of life among older adults with and without HIV.
- **Jessica Howell** at the Burnet Institute for research to further develop point of care testing for liver inflammation and fibrosis in chronic hepatitis B, which allows real time measurement with a droplet of blood within 20 minutes.
- **Jack Heron** at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital for a retrospective study that examines past HIV kidney transplants nationwide to examine therapy and patient outcomes.
- **Shio Yen Tio** at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and University of Melbourne for research to improve diagnosis of invasive fungal and bacterial infections in patients with haematological malignancies and stem cell transplants.
- **Andrew Pfeffer**, a Clinical Consultant Pharmacist and a Director of Pharmaceutical Research Services in Logan Queensland, for a new mobile medical centre to treat hepatitis C (HCV) in high-risk patient populations.

For the 2020 Gilead Fellowship Research Grants Program, there was \$300,000 available in total funding, an increase of \$50,000 from previous years. The Fellowship, now in its ninth year, aims to help bridge the gap in Australian research funding, providing support to projects which have a local community focus, and which often struggle to secure funding or face high competition.

The Fellowship is part of Gilead’s long-standing commitment to, and local investment in, research, with an additional independent funding of US\$300,000 (approximately AU\$410,000) donated to the Kirby Institute’s David Cooper Memorial Fund, and supporting a number of local researcher-led studies around the country, including the Kirby Institute’s EPIC-NSW study.

For all information enquiries, please contact Gilead Sciences ANZ on 1800 806 112 (within Australia) or email au.nz.medinfo@gilead.com.

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Notes to editor: In relation to this media announcement, no compensation was provided to Andrew Pfeffer or Miles Sparrow and the opinions expressed are their own.

About Gilead Sciences ANZ

Gilead Sciences, Inc. is a research-based biopharmaceutical company that discovers, develops and commercialises innovative medicines in areas of unmet medical need. The company strives to transform and simplify care for people with life-threatening illnesses around the world. Gilead has operations in more than 40 countries worldwide, with headquarters in Foster City, California.

Based in Melbourne, Gilead Sciences ANZ. employs more than 70 people in Australia.

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About the Gilead Australia Fellowship Grant Program

The Gilead Australia Fellowship Program judging panel is made up of experts from across Australia who are recognised for their significant contributions to research. This included:

- **Professor Ian Gust** – Professorial Fellow, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, The University of Melbourne
- **Professor Jacob George** – Robert W Storr Professor of Hepatic Medicine, University of Sydney and Head of Department, Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Westmead Hospital, Sydney
- **Professor John Zalberg** – Professor of Cancer Research, School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University
- **Professor Suzanne Crowe AM** – Program Director, Healthy Ageing (Expansion Program) and NHMRC Principal Research Fellow at the Burnet Institute in Melbourne,
- **Associate Professor James Ward** – Head of AH Infectious Diseases, Sexual Health and Wellbeing, SAHMRI, Adelaide
- **Dr Hesham Mir** – Medical Director, Gilead Sciences.

About the winning projects

Kieran Mulroney, University of Western Australia: Kieran Mulroney's project looks at better ways to run diagnostic tests for fungi in order to confirm infection and determine proper treatment. Invasive fungal infections can be difficult to detect and distinguish from viral or bacterial infections, resulting in delays when determining the type and course of treatment. Guidelines for immediate antibiotic



treatments usually don't cover fungi, which can mean that more time passes without the infection receiving proper treatment.

The funding from the Gilead Fellowship Grants will be used for a pilot study into the feasibility of a new diagnostic method developed in collaboration between the University of Western Australia and PathWest Laboratory Medicine, Western Australia.

Miles Sparrow, Alfred Health: Miles Sparrow's study aims to prove the feasibility of rapid testing for fecal biomarkers and therapeutic drug monitoring.

Currently, test results for these investigations in patients with Inflammatory Bowel Disease take approximately three weeks to be available and the processes involved are cumbersome and at times costly.

The technology for rapid testing has been available for the past few years, but it has not yet reached clinical practice in Australia.

The funding from the Gilead Fellowship Grants will go towards the materials that are used in these point of care tests, so clinicians can treat patients using results on the same day the tests were performed.

Nila Dharan, the Kirby Institute at UNSW Sydney: Nila Dharan's study looks at evaluating and comparing outcomes of ageing and quality of life among older adults with and without HIV.

With the advances in HIV treatment, many people with HIV who have access to care and treatment are living as long as those without HIV. However, those with HIV experience more ageing-related comorbidities than those without, even when their HIV is well-treated.

This study will involve a cohort of 440 people over the age of 55, 220 who are HIV positive and 220 who are HIV negative. The project seeks to explore the burden of specific ageing-related comorbidities in people with HIV and compare it to the burden in people without HIV. In addition, it seeks to explore the risk factors that can be associated with these conditions. Specifically, the project will evaluate for accelerated phenotypic age (which can correspond to a person's mortality risk) versus chronological age, neurocognitive decline, and frailty or declining physical strength.

The study will also review some mental health aspects, as well as socio-economic factors, which may affect the neurocognition and frailty of people living with HIV. The overall goal of this project is to improve quality of life outcomes in people with HIV, beyond treatment of the virus.

Andrew Pfeffer, Clinical Consultant Pharmacist and a Director of Pharmaceutical Research Services in Logan Queensland: Andrew Pfeffer's research project is to create a new mobile outreach medical centre to treat hepatitis C (HCV) in high-risk patient populations. Logan City in Brisbane South, where his clinic resides, has the fifth highest prevalence of hep c of all the health districts in Australia, and the third lowest treatment uptake rate. Andrew and his team aim to take the cure to patients.

His project is to go and find the high-risk patient population and to set up an outreach clinic for people leaving custody, and re-entering the community. The project's goal is to set up a sustainable business model, that can continue past the duration of the fellowship grant.

Jessica Howell, Burnet Institute: Jessica Howell's research aims to further develop point of care testing for liver disease, in order to allow real time measurement with a droplet of blood within 20 minutes.

Chronic hepatitis B, like HCV, is currently more common in areas that do not have access to healthcare services, such as regional and remote areas in Australia.

This point of care test measures ALT, a key marker for inflammation in the liver, to properly determine treatment.



The funding from the Gilead Fellowship Grant will enable an analysis of larger cohort samples to evaluate how well the test performs for diagnosis and follow-up testing to monitor treatment efficacy with clear results.

Jack Heron, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital: Jack Heron's project is a retrospective study that examines past HIV kidney transplants nationwide to examine therapy and patient outcomes.

People living with HIV have historically been denied access to kidney transplants, even with end-stage disease when this surgery is the preferred treatment.

To date, no review of data examining outcomes before and after kidney transplant have been undertaken for HIV positive recipients in Australia in the past decade.

This project aims to describe the characteristics and outcomes of all kidney transplants performed in people living with HIV in Australia on HIV treatment.

Shio Yen Tio, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and University of Melbourne: Shio Yen Tio's research aims to improve the diagnostic yield in malignant haematology and stem cell transplant patients who developed pulmonary infiltrates during the course of treatment for their underlying disease. These patients are at high risk of developing invasive pulmonary fungal and bacterial infections due to prolonged neutropenia. Yet literature has shown that despite extensive investigations, up to 50% of these patients with pulmonary infiltrates were without diagnosis owing to the limitations of the current diagnostic method.

The funding from the Gilead Fellowship Grants will be used to enable further testing of pulmonary samples with a novel assay – a customised bacterial and fungal multiplex-tandem PCR (MT-PCR). It is anticipated that this multiplex assay will lead to more accurate diagnosis of pulmonary infiltrates in these patients, resulting in improved antifungal stewardship and reducing drug toxicity from unnecessary or prolonged use of antifungals.

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¹ Burnet Institute, 2018. *Hepatitis C Elimination*, available at:
https://www.burnet.edu.au/system/asset/file/3190/Eliminate_Hep_C_brochure_2018_web_FINAL.pdf. Last accessed December 2019.