



## Fellowship underpins great progress in genetic research

**Associate Professor David Booth, from the Westmead Millennium Institute, has recently concluded his MS Research Australia Senior Research Fellowship.**

Associate Professor Booth's research looked at the functions and interactions of altered genes in MS. The MS Research Australia Senior Research Fellowships are designed to fund salary requirements for leading researchers in the MS field for an extended period, to provide the stability they need to pursue longer term research outcomes. This Fellowship, the largest awarded by MS Research Australia, ran for five years from 2010-2014 and received major support from the Hunt Family Foundation and the Penn Foundation. During this time Associate Professor

Booth's research has contributed enormously to our understanding of the genetic basis for susceptibility to MS and is showing imminent promise for the development of tests that will assist with prognosis and treatment decisions for people with MS.

Many people with MS do not respond to the first therapy that they try and this wastes precious time, and risks damaging relapses, while an optimal treatment is identified. Associate Professor Booth's work has identified that there is often a genetic basis to treatment response and his work may lead to tests that can identify the most suitable treatment for an individual from the outset.

This exciting progress is the result of meticulous and detailed research into the role that changes to genes may play in

the development of MS, in particular, the way differences in certain genes lead to changes in the immune system function of people with MS. This in turn has revealed significant clues on potential targets for new treatment development. Another arm of his research looks at biomarkers, molecules that can easily be screened for in blood or cerebrospinal fluid for clinical use in MS diagnosis and prognosis.

Over the course of his Fellowship, Associate Professor Booth has published over 60 papers in prestigious medical journals, including *Nature* and *Nature Genetics*, and has three patent applications in process, including the use of genetics to predict treatment response.

Associate Professor Booth has also been very successful in leveraging funding from other sources. During this time he has won five National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grants worth more than \$2.5 million to further his team's research. Starting in 2015, Associate Professor Booth was awarded a prestigious NHMRC Senior Research Fellowship for the next five years to continue his important work.

'We are delighted with the substantial achievements of Associate Professor David Booth during his MS Research Australia Senior Research Fellowship', said Dr Matthew Miles, Chief Executive Officer of MS Research Australia, 'These Fellowships ensure that our best minds stay focussed on MS research to deliver better outcomes for people with MS and we would like to congratulate David on his outstanding progress over the last five years'. ■



Associate Professor David Booth, Westmead Millennium Institute, NSW.



## A word from our Chief Executive Officer

In this issue of NEXT we report on the progress of a number of MS Research Australia funded projects. Associate Professor David Booth has recently concluded his incredibly successful Senior Research Fellowship looking at genetics in MS. Dr Stan Mitew has been making great progress with his research into myelin repair in the brain, and vacation scholar Ms Jasmine Wilson investigated a type of stem cell to identify possibilities for future treatments.

We are incredibly grateful to philanthropists Mr Babak Moini and Ms Rochelle Collis who have generously committed \$1 million to MS Research Australia. They are absolutely dedicated to furthering Australian medical research and recently spoke to the Australian Financial Review about creating a butterfly effect to encourage change in the culture of philanthropy in Australia. They are challenging us to match their donation with other sources; including from our philanthropic donors and also via the Kiss Goodbye to MS campaign.

This year, MS researchers from around Australia joined us to help with our social media launch of Kiss Goodbye to MS. Trending on twitter was #redlabcoatday and incredible images of researchers in red lab coats. The launch was wonderful to showcase the people at the frontline working hard to achieve research breakthroughs.

Thank you to all of the MS researchers, fundraisers and supporters for getting involved and making the 2015 Kiss Goodbye to MS campaign so successful. ■

**Dr Matthew Miles**

# Welcoming new Board members

MS Research Australia is pleased to be able to welcome two new members to the Board of Directors, Mr Mike Hemingway and Ms Tanya Branwhite.

‘Both of our new board members bring a valuable wealth of knowledge and expertise to the team as well as a strong interest in MS research. They have perfectly matched skills to further the strategic goals of MS Research Australia,’ said Mr Paul Murnane, Chairman, MS Research Australia.

The Board of Directors hold overall responsibility for the direction and management of Australian MS research initiatives.

Mike holds a BSc and MBA degree and his career has spanned two very different industries. Initially working as a qualified molecular biologist with Biotechnology Australia and then as a senior banker specialising in global financial markets. Mike worked mainly with Westpac Banking Corporation, NatWest Markets Australia and National Australia Bank.

Mike has been at the forefront of many strategic and fundraising initiatives for MS Research Australia including F5m+ and Kiss Goodbye to MS as well as integrating the views of a person with MS into our research agenda. He is extremely knowledgeable on many aspects of MS Research Australia including the workings of our robust research governance and the Research Management Council. Mike attended his first Board meeting last month.

Mike said ‘Since being diagnosed with MS in 2003, the beacon of hope for me has been research into the cause of and a cure for MS. Having been involved with MS Research Australia for ten years, I am humbled and delighted to become a member of the Board and to be able to contribute even more to this outstanding organisation and its goal of a world free of MS.’

Tanya is an Executive Director of the Future Fund, Australia’s sovereign wealth fund and one of the most senior women in the Australian financial markets. She has more than 20 years’ experience in equities research, funds management and as an investment analyst. She has an exceptional reputation as one of Australia’s longest serving and highest regarded analysts.



Mr Mike Hemingway



Ms Tanya Branwhite

Tanya said ‘I have for some time had the opportunity to support the efforts of MS Research Australia through my role as an MS Angel as well as in my capacity as a director on the Macquarie Group Foundation Board.

‘MS Research Australia has shown what is possible when an organisation is focussed, driven and holds itself to account against clearly articulated objectives even when these objectives seem highly unlikely! The progress that has been made in both understanding and treating MS as a result of the research funded through MS Research Australia is simply remarkable. But the objective is far from being achieved. So I am thrilled and honoured to have the opportunity to support MS Research Australia as a member of the Board and am excited about one of the focus areas of MS research worldwide – progressive MS research.’ The Board is looking forward to Tanya attending her first Board meeting shortly. ■



## Lessons from brain development may help repair myelin in MS

**Dr Stanislaw Mitew, from the University of Melbourne, has made excellent progress in his research looking at myelin repair in the brain. Dr Mitew has recently reported on the results of the first year of his two-year MS Research Australia Post-doctoral Fellowship.**

In MS, the insulating myelin layer that surrounds nerve fibres is damaged and lost. The body naturally has the ability to repair and regenerate damaged myelin, but in MS, this repair is often incomplete. Dr Mitew's research is exploring ways to harness the body's natural capacity for myelin repair using a type of stem cell present in the brain. Under normal circumstances these 'precursor' stem cells can mature into oligodendrocyte cells that will produce functional myelin.

Dr Mitew's project has firstly investigated the normal life cycle of these 'oligodendrocyte precursor cells' in the brains of healthy mice, studying the process of how these cells mature into active myelin-producing oligodendrocyte cells. Dr Mitew has been able to demonstrate that the oligodendrocytes in the young adult brain persist well into adulthood and are gradually lost as a normal consequence of ageing. At the same time, new oligodendrocytes are

continually being produced in the healthy adult brain to replace older cells at the end of their lifespan, keeping the overall number of oligodendrocytes steady.

This finding is important as it demonstrated that even in some of the very old mice, there was ongoing oligodendrocyte production and replacement, indicating that myelin generation is possible even in old age.

Dr Mitew found that the myelin-producing cells that are produced later in life tend to have some important structural differences to those produced early in life, and further research is needed to determine if these

differences alter the way the nerve signals are transmitted.

Following on from this work, Dr Mitew is now examining mice with MS-like illness, to try and understand how the natural process of myelin regeneration is different under disease conditions.

Dr Mitew will also investigate whether the rate of myelin production can be improved in laboratory models of MS, by reactivating the mechanisms for myelin production that occur during early development of the brain. If successful, this may be an exciting new treatment approach to combat the damage that occurs in MS.

Dr Mitew received an excellent grounding in neuroscience research through his post-graduate studies at the Menzies Institute for Medical Research and published an impressive number of papers in the course of obtaining his PhD. The progress he has already made in the first year of his Fellowship at the University of Melbourne shows that the potential he showed as a PhD student is now coming to fruition in these early stages of his MS research career.

Talking about the progress in his research, Dr Mitew said 'This important discovery suggests that myelin produced later in life is inherently different in quality than that produced during development. Understanding how this may affect myelin regeneration has important implications for remyelination therapy'.

Dr Mitew's fellowship is supported by Foundation 5 Million Plus.

To review progress on all MS Research Australia-funded Fellowships, Scholarships and Project Grants, please visit the MS Research Australia website at [www.msra.org.au/projects-we-fund](http://www.msra.org.au/projects-we-fund) ■



Dr Stanislaw Mitew, The University of Melbourne.

# Spinal cord tissue provides clues

**A recent study from Italian researchers at the University of Milan has found that certain molecules were present in significantly lower levels in the spinal cords of people with MS. The researchers suggest that this may play a role in the failure of myelin repair that causes the accumulation of damage in MS.**

In MS, the immune system attacks the protective myelin sheath that insulates nerve cells. Initially, the body is able to repair and regenerate this myelin (known as 'remyelination'), but over time, the body's ability to remyelinate becomes weakened. The exact causes of this remyelination failure are unclear, but much research has been dedicated to understanding the mechanisms of remyelination and looking for new ways to encourage myelin repair and regeneration to reverse the effects of MS.

As discussed in the article on page 3, researchers are investigating how to encourage myelin repair through stimulating stem cells in the brain. But this research needs to go hand in hand with research to understand what factors in the brain and spinal cord may inhibit myelin regrowth.

Published in the international medical journal *Neuroscience*, this recent study used post-mortem spinal cord tissue from 16 people who had MS, donated to the UK MS Tissue Bank at the Imperial College, London. This was compared to spinal cord tissue from 13 people who did not have MS or any other neurological disorder.

Using specialised molecular biology techniques, the researchers studied the levels of three specific molecules – cobalamin, epidermal growth factor (EGF), and cellular prions. These molecules are known to be involved in the process of myelin production, and all work together to regulate the environment around the nerve in order to promote and encourage the growth of functional myelin around each nerve cell.

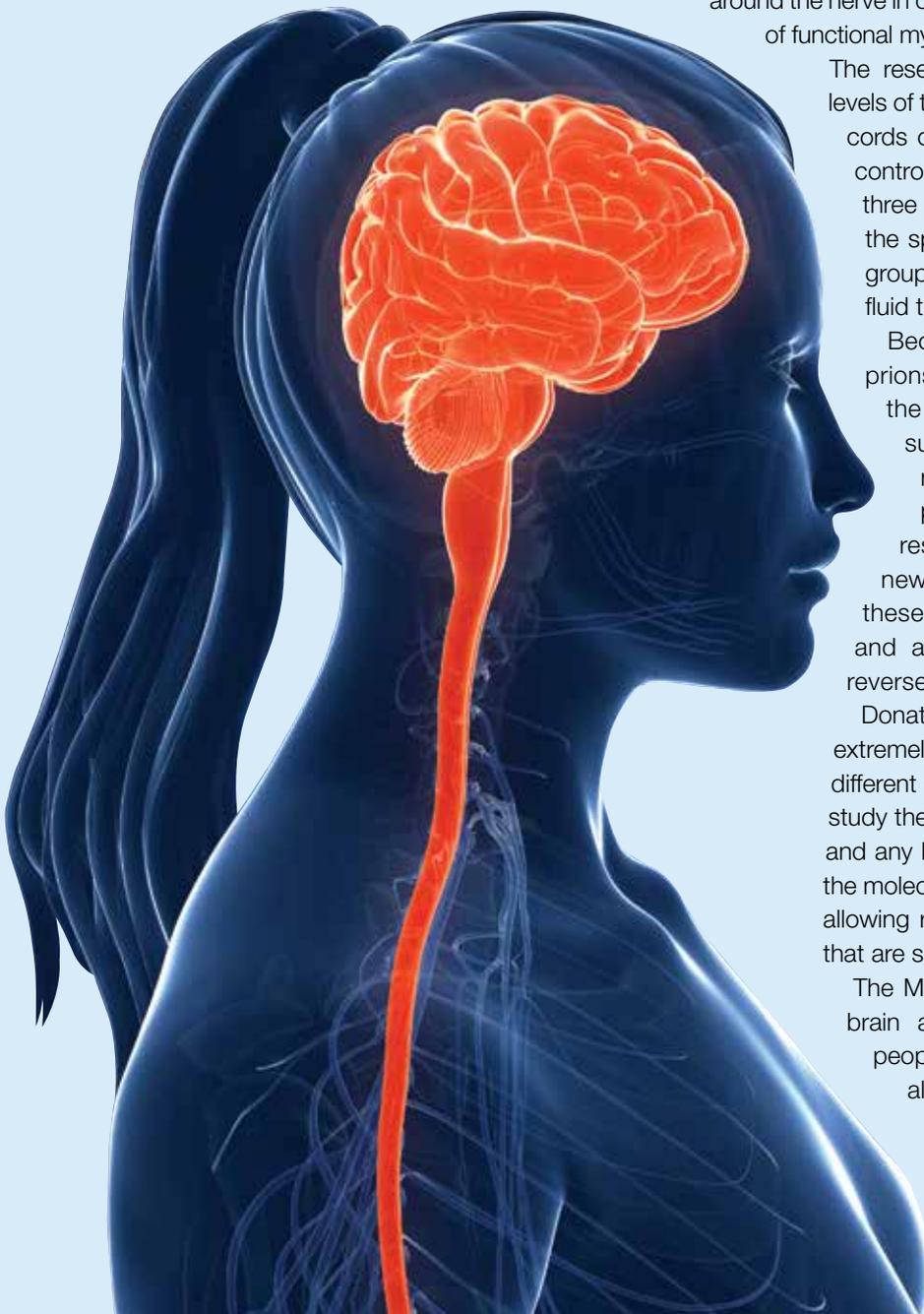
The researchers set out to identify whether the levels of these molecules were different in the spinal cords of people who had MS, compared to the control group. They found that each of these three molecules was decreased in MS within the spinal cord tissue compared to the control group, and were also altered in the cerebrospinal fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord.

Because cobalamin, EGF, and cellular prions have been shown to play a role in the production of myelin, the researchers suggest that reduced levels of these molecules may be part of the road-block preventing myelin repair in MS. Further research will help to determine whether new treatments could be developed to target these molecules, to remove this road-block and allow new myelin to be produced and reverse MS-related damage.

Donated spinal cord and brain tissue is extremely versatile and supports a wide range of different types of research. Tissue may be used to study the structure and anatomy of the tissue itself and any lesions that are present, but also to study the molecules and chemicals within the tissue, even allowing researchers to study the DNA and genes that are switched on or off in the tissue.

The MS Research Australia Brain Bank collects brain and spinal cord tissue donations from people with MS who have passed away, allowing researchers to conduct vitally important work.

To register your interest in becoming a donor with the MS Research Australia Brain Bank, visit [www.msbrainbank.org.au/register](http://www.msbrainbank.org.au/register) or call 1300 672 265. ■



# Research Development Coordinator at MS Research Australia

Dr Alana Shepherd is part of the scientific team responsible for communicating research information to the MS Research Australia community.

Alana is involved with the coordination of several MS Research Australia national collaborations, and also coordinates the MS Research Australia Brain Bank, which collects post-mortem brain and spinal cord tissue from people with MS for use in research. As part of this role, she works closely with people with MS and their families to facilitate tissue donation.

Alana has a number of years' experience in translating and communicating research. Prior to joining MS Research Australia in 2014, Alana worked with the Schizophrenia Research Institute for five years developing an online resource of information about schizophrenia.

Alana has a Bachelor of Science with Honours in Neuroscience from the University of Sydney, and a PhD in brain imaging in schizophrenia from the University of New South Wales.

'In my role with MS Research Australia, I am ideally positioned to use my skills to translate the exciting work that is happening in the MS field in Australia and around the world' says Alana. 'It is a privilege to be witnessing the changes that are happening through research, such as the growing number of treatments making a real difference to the lives of many people with MS.'

'Working with the MS Research Australia Brain Bank, it is so rewarding to see the generosity and commitment of so many people with MS and their families, who make such an important gift and enable research that cannot be done in any other way.' ■



## The pathway to new treatments for MS – your help in clinical research is vital

**The development of new therapies to treat MS and stop its progression, and new methods to manage the symptoms of MS, is entirely dependent on the involvement of people with MS.**

Taking a research finding from the laboratory bench to its standard use in the clinic to benefit all people with MS, requires several phases of clinical research in groups of people with MS. Early phase clinical trials (Phases I and II) establish first and foremost that a new intervention is safe. Larger scale Phase III trials then provide the rigorous evidence required to establish that the treatment is effective. This process is necessary both for pharmaceutical interventions, as well as for the development of evidence-based services and symptom management therapies for people with MS. To learn about the many different clinical research studies underway and find trials that are currently recruiting, please visit [www.mstrials.org.au](http://www.mstrials.org.au)

Some of the studies currently underway around Australia include:

- A Phase IIB trial of experimental microparticle therapy, MIS416 for secondary progressive MS is currently running in Perth, Brisbane and Melbourne.
- Researchers at the Austin Hospital in Melbourne are investigating whether Fampridine can help improve upper limb dysfunction in people with MS.
- Sydney-based researchers are investigating whether cycling exercise with electrical muscle stimulation can assist persons with severe MS to perform exercise.
- The PrevANZ vitamin D MS Prevention Trial continues to recruit individuals who have experienced a first episode suggestive of MS at 20 sites around Australia and New Zealand. This trial that will investigate whether oral vitamin D supplementation can prevent or delay a diagnosis of MS

following a first demyelinating event.

- Investigators in Perth are conducting a trial to test whether a course of narrow band UVB phototherapy decreases the risk of developing MS in people who have experienced a first episode suggestive of MS.
- A trial of an experimental therapy for the MS-like disease, neuromyelitis optica, is currently running in Sydney, Gold Coast, and Melbourne.
- A trial combining balance training and transcranial magnetic brain stimulation is underway in Perth, to determine whether using these modes of treatment together can further improve balance and walking in people with MS.
- Researchers in Sydney are investigating whether body temperature regulation differs in people with MS and how best to manage the heat-sensitivity experienced by people with MS. ■

# Changing the culture of giving

MS Research Australia is thrilled that philanthropists Babak Moini and Rochelle Collis have recently committed to give a leadership gift of \$1 million to MS Research Australia.

Not satisfied with just giving \$1 million which will be dedicated entirely to MS research, Babak and Rochelle are giving an additional \$1 million to the Facioscapulohumeral Dystrophy (FSHD) Global Research Foundation to help fund research efforts for this form of muscular dystrophy. Babak and Rochelle have also previously donated to the FSHD Global Research Foundation. This recent support has been catalytic in building a collaboration between both not-for-profit organisations.

Babak and Rochelle have chosen charities that entirely focus on medical research, as they view medical endeavour research as an investment into the future and want to see clear outcomes of this funding that can be measured. Babak also noted the importance of the Australian medical research community collaborating with what is happening internationally.

Both were recently interviewed by the Australian Financial Review (AFR) which ran nationally on the 5th May. The article also mentioned the MS Research Australia vitamin D Prevention Trial – PrevANZ, a world-first clinical trial that will test whether vitamin D supplementation can prevent MS in those who have experienced a first episode of demyelination – or clinically isolated syndrome (CIS). The trial is a double-blind, randomised clinical trial and active recruitment is currently taking place.

‘We want help change the culture of giving in Australia and encourage others to donate to these important charities or to an area that is of interest to the individual’, said Babak.

‘This is not a simple donation, the separate \$1 million will challenge both organisations and individuals to match these funds prior to distributing the money to funding the best research available in Australia.’

Rochelle, whose sister, Vianna, has MS, adds that ‘we want to be a catalyst and help create lasting change with our donation – the so-called butterfly effect. We want to ensure both organisation’s major donors and people donating through the

**FINANCIAL REVIEW**

Philanthropic entrepreneur Babak Moini, left, with fiancée Rochelle Collis, centre, and her sister Viana. PHOTO: NICK WALKER

## Laser Clinics Australia founder Babak Moini gives away fortune

**Jemima Whyte**

The millionaire founder of Laser Clinics Australia reckons \$300,000 a year is enough to fund a “a nice happy life”, with perhaps a few hundred thousand extra to make investments.

Babak Moini, who turns 50 this year, says Australians have become too greedy, and wants to make an example by giving away the bulk of his rapidly acquired fortune to medical research.

Mr Moini and his fiancée, Rochelle Collis, will donate \$1 million to two charities – MS Research Australia, which, among other things, is funding a clinical trial into the links between the disease and vitamin D deficiency, and FSHD, the Bill Moss-backed foundation that funds medical research into a specific type of muscular dystrophy.

It’s the second donation – though Mr Moini prefers the term “investment” – the couple have made to FSHD in less than a year.

“I couldn’t if I tried spend more money; I now feel we have a social responsibility now we’ve got to this point, to share the wealth and invest the wealth for the betterment of society,” Mr Moini says, saying he usually lives in \$750 Uniqlo white T-shirts, which he tries to get on sale, though he dressed up for *The Australian Financial Review* photo. “Greed has come back, and unfortunately in a bigger way than it was before.”

Despite a spate of megagifts and bequests in recent years by the likes of the late Paul Ramsay, the Packer family, Andrew “Twiggy” Forrest, Clive Berghofer and Graham Tuckwell, four in 10 Australians with an annual income of more than \$1 million still

**What we’d like to achieve is entrepreneurial philanthropy.**

Babak Moini, founder Laser Clinics Australia

give nothing to charity. In the US, charitable giving amounts to 1.7 per cent of gross domestic product; in Australia the figure is 0.7 per cent, according to JBWere.

The couple selected the two charities after researching the sector for about eight months, identifying charities with strong corporate governance, overseas collaborations, and that were willing to embrace the concept of seeking other donors to “match” their investment.

“The amount of wealth we have is not going to change the medical research industry,” he says. “It’s not going to change philanthropy in Australia. What we’d like to achieve is entrepreneurial philanthropy. We’d like to kick the conversation along.”

Ms Collis’ sister Viana Collis was diagnosed with remitted progressive MS in her 30s, but the couple say donating to an MS charity was not a foregone conclusion.

Three out of four people who have MS are women, and are typically diagnosed at 30. High-stress jobs are often linked, as are genetic factors.

Mr Moini’s wealth grew after private equity firm Archer Capital last year bought a stake in Laser Clinics Australia, the firm he co-founded that has about 50 stores around the country.

Among Mr Moini’s more recent business ventures are a chocolate and ice-cream franchise called Cloud 9, which has opened in Sydney’s Newtown, and a \$1 million investment in online auction site Fine Art House.

Ms Collis, who owns the franchise to the Bondi Junction Laser Clinic, is also an ambassador to “Kiss Goodbye to MS”, MS Research Australia’s big fund raising event that begins this month.

Kiss Goodbye to MS campaign or FSHD’s Chocolate Ball are to be inspired by this and may also want to help’.

Dr Matthew Miles, Chief Executive Officer of MS Research Australia, says, ‘Babak and Rochelle are part of an incredibly exciting change in philanthropy in Australia happening over the past decade, where a donation is seen as an investment. Evidence of exemplary research governance and closely monitoring all research outcomes arising from their funding is of paramount importance to them. They are visionary in their approach’.

Natalie Moss, Managing Director of the FSHD Global Research Foundation adds, ‘We are greatly inspired by Babak and

Rochelle’s innovative philanthropy and so very grateful for their incredible support. It has been fantastic to work with MS Research Australia on this initiative and see some of the similarities in ensuring transparency and accountability are key to the structure and ethos of both organisations, even though the diseases we are trying to find cures for are, in many ways, different.’

The donation is one of the largest singular donations from an individual or couple in MS Research Australia’s history.

This exceptionally generous gift will have a huge impact on the Australian MS field and will go a long way towards realising our goals of finding new treatments and a cure for each type of MS. ■

# Red Lab Coat Day launched Kiss Goodbye to MS

Social media was the ideal platform to launch the 2015 Kiss Goodbye to MS campaign, and within hours #redlabcoatday was trending, with more than 130 MS researchers from around Australia posting photos of their teams in red lab coats.

Launched on May 1, as a world first initiative, Red Lab Coat Day provided the perfect opportunity to profile researchers who are dedicating their skills to the field of MS research, and showcase the scientific talent we have in Australia.

MS researchers were invited to take photos of their teams in red lab coats and share them on social media using the hashtag #redlabcoatday, driving a conversation about the importance of research into MS and the significant advances that are being seen as a direct result of this important work. The MS community embraced Red Lab Coat Day and used the opportunity to recognise the dedication of our Australian researchers and the ground breaking achievements being made.

Kiss Goodbye to MS is an initiative of MS Research Australia and seeks to empower those with MS, their friends, family and colleagues to raise vital funds for MS research during the month of May. It is the largest national campaign dedicated to the funding of research into MS.

'We were thrilled with the support the MS research community gave to Red Lab Coat Day and Kiss Goodbye to MS this year. It is inspiring for our hard working fundraisers to see the dedication and brain power focussed on understanding MS,' said Zoe Chapman, Kiss Goodbye to MS Campaign Manager.

Associate Professor David Booth, Westmead Millennium Institute said 'Our research is made possible by the invaluable support from Kiss Goodbye to MS and examines the interactions between genetics, vitamin D and treatment response. Our work, along with the work of many others will allow us to ultimately identify better treatment options, understanding the triggers and ultimately work towards finding a cure for MS'.

Currently more than 650 researchers and clinicians based at 54 universities and research institutes actively focus on MS in their research efforts, plus many more in health services and hospitals across the country.

In the past decade, MS Research Australia researchers have uncovered critical new findings into MS - including the link between a lack of vitamin D and the development of MS, establishing the national MS brain and tissue donation program and contributing to the identification of 110 MS risk genes which could lead to the development of improved targeted treatment options.

'Medical research has placed Australia at the forefront of the global effort to uncover new findings and insights in both the diagnosis and treatment of MS,' said Dr Lisa Melton, Research Development Manager. ■



# Vacation scholarship supports promising undergraduate student

This year, MS Research Australia awarded four vacation scholarships to undergraduate students around Australia. These scholarships provide a valuable opportunity for promising undergraduate students to gain experience working in a lab.

Jasmine Wilson was recently awarded a MS Research Australia Vacation Scholarship to undertake a ten week internship with Dr Iain Comerford at the University of Adelaide. Under Dr Comerford's supervision, Ms Wilson's project aimed to study a certain type of stem cell in more detail, to identify if it may hold promise for developing future treatments for MS.

Current therapies that treat ongoing MS are not effective for everyone, and are not able to repair or regenerate MS lesions. New treatment options are of crucial importance to help reverse the damage caused by MS relapses and to prevent accumulation of disability and illness progression.

Cell-based therapies, such as the use of adult human stem cells, hold great promise for the treatment of MS, but they are still in a very early stage of investigation. Vast improvements to these approaches are required before they will be in a position to be widely used as an MS treatment. Currently, stem cells can be isolated from a range

of sources including bone marrow, fatty tissue, and dental pulp.

The team have recently shown that dental pulp stem cells can be isolated from the pulp inside human teeth, and that when administered to mice with an MS-like disease, these cells can potentially inhibit the symptoms of disease.

During her scholarship, Ms Wilson was able to modify these cells to express a particular receptor that controls the activation of the immune system. This modification then enabled the stem cells to enter the brain and spinal cord. This is a crucial step forward in making stem cells a viable option in developing treatments for the repair or regeneration of myelin tissue.

This work provides a valuable basis for further study, and Dr Comerford's team are continuing work to determine if these stem cells may promote tissue repair and inhibit inflammation in mice with MS-like illness. Early results of this work are showing that this approach may improve illness outcomes for mice with MS-like disease.

This year two vacation scholarships, including Ms Wilson's, were made possible by a generous donation from siblings Ian Triganza and Natalie Gordon. They said 'It is very exciting that the donation made on our late



Jasmine Wilson

mother's behalf has been able to assist the two scholars with their chosen fields of research, and we can only hope that the results of their findings are able to assist people with MS, and contribute in some small way to finding cures for this cruel disease.' ■

## Help MS Research Australia find a cure for MS

**Donate** (Donations over \$2 are tax deductible)

To support MS Research Australia's vital work I would like to:

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