

Media Release

28 SEPTEMBER 2023

The Leukaemia Foundation and Tour de Cure announce Breakthrough Research Fellowships in bid to save more lives

As part of an ongoing commitment to support Australia's aspiring leaders in blood cancer research, the Leukaemia Foundation and Tour de Cure have partnered to launch the inaugural Breakthrough Research Fellowship program.

Two of the best and brightest blood cancer researchers will each receive the prestigious \$1million grant to undertake their blood cancer research projects over the next five years.

The Breakthrough Fellowship program is one of the most significant investments into blood cancer research the Leukaemia Foundation has made.

Leukaemia Foundation CEO Chris Tanti said that the program is incredibly important and reinforces the Leukaemia Foundation and Tour de Cure's commitment to improving the health outcomes of Australians living with blood cancer and to ultimately save more lives.

"We know that every significant innovation in blood cancer comes as a direct result of investment in people and research," said Mr Tanti.

"Since 2000, the Leukaemia Foundation has been supporting the careers of Australia's leading researchers, with these new \$1million Breakthrough Fellowships continuing our support of excellence in blood cancer research."

By joining forces with Tour de Cure as the inaugural partner of the Breakthrough Fellowship program, the Leukaemia Foundation remains at the forefront of funding ground-breaking blood cancer research and building on the \$57million we've invested over the past 23 years.

"Speaking on behalf of the entire Tour de Cure family, we are delighted to be partnering with the Leukaemia Foundation," said Paul Mirabelle, Chair, Tour de Cure Grants Committee.

"We have been strong supporters of the Leukaemia Foundation for many years and join them whole heartedly in their vision of zero deaths from blood cancer, including leukaemia, lymphoma and myeloma, by 2035.

"This is an audacious goal but one which is aligned with our own ambitions. We believe strongly in the importance of backing our country's brilliant researchers and feel this is an essential element to achieving these goals."

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Tour de Cure has contributed \$2million in matched funding for the Breakthrough Fellowship Program.

Mr Tanti added; "Our partnership with Tour de Cure as the philanthropic partner for our Breakthrough Fellowship program fills a critical void in blood cancer research funding."

"It further provides the opportunity and capacity for some of Australia's brightest blood cancer researchers to undertake research that focuses on significant knowledge and treatment gaps, and potentially transform the lives blood cancer patients in this country."

The inaugural recipients of the Breakthrough Fellowship are accomplished researchers, with both already having made substantial differences to our understanding of blood cancer and patient care.

The Breakthrough Fellowship will enable both recipients to lead and shape blood cancer research in the future in Australia.

Fellowship 1: Dr Ashley Ng – Uncovering the secrets behind leukaemia treatment resistance

Dr Ng is a distinguished clinical haematologist at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, and a haematopathologist and clinician researcher at WEHI.

As a leading expert in blood cancer cell development, leukaemia research and leukaemia therapy, Dr Ng has made significant contributions to the field and authored over 60 publications and research articles in leading journals.

He was recently awarded the prestigious Metcalf Prize in Stem Cell Research by the National Stem Cell Foundation and is a past recipient of the 2011-2013 Leukaemia Foundation Cure Cancer Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Dr Ng's innovative research project, *Igniting Progress in B-ALL: Elucidating Resistance Mechanisms and Pioneering Therapies*, will be conducted over five years at WEHI.

He seeks to pioneer the future of blood cancer treatment by lifting the molecular lid on how blood cancer resists current medicines, with a focus on acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL).

Dr Ng believes that breakthroughs in acute leukaemia therapy require innovative approaches and it's this mindset that's set the scene for his research with the project aiming to:

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- Increase the understanding of changes that occur to cancerous ALL cells.
- Use cutting-edge methods to understand what molecular factors lead to changes that cause the disease to be resistant to current standard treatment or lead someone to relapse.
- Develop and test new potential therapies where ALL is resistant to current standard treatments.

His research represents new hope and treatment options for families facing ALL, particularly young Australians diagnosed with high-risk ALL who don't respond well to standard treatment.

"I seek to build on my leadership role in the Australian blood cancer ecosystem, enhancing my national and international reputation in blood cancer research with the Leukaemia Foundation Fellowship," said Dr Ng.

Fellowship 2: Dr Ashwin Unnikrishnan – Replacing 'blunt-edged' chemotherapy with targeted treatment

Dr Unnikrishnan is a cancer researcher renowned for his impactful translational biology research in blood cancers. He has a strong focus on myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS) and acute myeloid leukaemia (AML).

As the Head of Molecular Mechanisms in the Leukaemia Laboratory at the Lowy Cancer Research Centre at UNSW Sydney, he leads a team of senior postdoctoral scientists, PhD students and research staff.

Dr Unnikrishnan's research goal is to improve the understanding of factors that reduce the effectiveness of frontline therapy for leukaemia and use this evidence to develop more effective treatment options.

His research project, *Skipping beyond chemotherapy: Therapeutically targeting aberrant RNA splicing in Acute Myeloid Leukaemia*, will be conducted over five years at UNSW, and aims to provide new treatment options for people diagnosed with AML where standard treatment has failed.

"The standard treatment for AML is chemotherapy, a blunt-edged tool that kills cells indiscriminately whilst being ineffective at eliminating leukaemic cells from the body," said Dr Unnikrishnan.

"Our proposal aims to improve this by discovering more specific and effective ways to kill leukaemia cells."

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The research hopes to develop better treatment options for AML by targeting ribonucleic acid (RNA) slicing, a molecular pathway that Dr Unnikrishnan's lab has discovered is frequently altered in people with AML.

He added; "I aim to establish a new paradigm for treating leukaemia, by targeting cancer-specific vulnerabilities in leukaemic cells created by RNA alterations."

"These treatments could be more effective and with fewer side effects, as healthy cells would be spared."

Dr Unnikrishnan's research hopes to save more lives from AML by looking past standard chemotherapy and toward new, more effective approaches to treatment with this fellowship allowing him to do just that.

To be awarded the Breakthrough Fellowship, applicants were assessed by a panel of the most esteemed researchers, clinicians and scientists in blood cancer in Australia.

The nationally and internationally recognised experts selected Dr Ng and Dr Unnikrishnan as the first two Breakthrough Fellows for their innovative research projects that will help transform critical treatment and care gaps for blood cancer patients in Australia.

The Breakthrough Fellowship Program is one of the largest health and medical research grants for researchers offered by an NGO or charity in Australia. The program will help to cement Australia's leadership position in blood cancer research internationally for years to come.

For more information on the Breakthrough Fellowship Program, please go to leukaemia.org.au/breakthrough-fellowship.

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Available for interview: Chris Tanti, CEO Leukaemia Foundation

For media enquiries or to request an interview, please email media@leukaemia.org.au.

About the Leukaemia Foundation: The Leukaemia Foundation stands with Australia to help cure and conquer blood cancer – with care. Together we are attacking every blood cancer, from every direction, in every way we can. We stand beside every Australian to be their voice and their someone-to-turn to, fighting to get them access to the best care. We also accelerate research that is delivering rapid advancements in blood cancer diagnosis and treatments. Plus, we provide

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services and support that empower people living with any blood cancer to live well after diagnosis. You can learn more about the Leukaemia Foundation and blood cancer at leukaemia.org.au.