

Philanthropic Donation Looks To Emerging Field of ‘Personalised Medicine’

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Lina Caneva, Editor



Philanthropists Bruce and Christine Wilson. Image: Dean Bradley

A \$5.5 million philanthropic donation towards genetic testing for blood cancer patients has been described as advancing Australia’s global leadership in the emerging field of “personalised medicine”.

A personal pledge of \$5.5 million over four years by cancer survivor Christine Wilson and her husband Bruce, via the Snowdome Foundation, will go towards the establishment of the Christine and Bruce Wilson Centre for Lymphoma Genomics.

According to cancer specialist Professor Miles Prince, who is also the co-founder and director of Snowdome Foundation, the new centre represents Victoria’s and Australia’s global leadership in the emerging field of “personalised medicine”.

“It means an unprecedented number of Australian lymphoma patients will now have access to advanced genomic testing of their tumours at leading cancer research hospital, Peter Mac [Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre], which will lead to more accurate diagnosis and better treatment choices,” Prince said.

“It’s establishment will ensure Peter Mac can significantly expand its repertoire, capacity and sophistication of genetic testing to accommodate the needs of lymphoma patients more widely.

“Up until now, a very small percentage of lymphoma patients have been able to access genomics testing, which has meant many Australians affected by hard-to-treat cancers have not had access to personalised medicine, which matches a treatment to the specific condition for that patient.

“This has been made possible by the generosity of Christine Wilson and her family.”

Blood cancers are the third leading cause of death from cancer. It is estimated that in 2014, 12,165 Australians were diagnosed with blood cancers (lymphoma, leukaemia, myeloma and myelodysplastic syndromes).

Wilson, who was treated for lymphoma at Peter Mac, said on Tuesday her family felt moved to act after seeing many blood cancer patients not respond well to conventional treatment or relapse much sooner than expected.

“We were struck by how genetics testing can save lives, or improve quality of life, for a group of patients who are in dire need of other treatment options,” Wilson said.

“As a patient living with lymphoma for 25 years, I have been fortunate enough to experience the benefits of this cutting-edge technology. My family hopes that our support will make the centre’s ground-breaking work accessible to all Australians affected. We are also hoping this will inspire others to give generously towards making this a standard of care for everyone in the future.”

In addition to this donation, both the Peter Mac centre and the University of Melbourne said they had committed to additional resources to support broadening the scope of the Christine and Bruce Wilson Centre of Lymphoma Genomics to extend complex genetic analysis to malignancies such as acute myeloid leukaemia.

Prince said the Snowdome Foundation’s ultimate goal was to raise \$10 million for genomics research

“Acts of huge generosity such as these are what drives world-firsts,” he said.

“The leaps and bounds made possible by this new centre is what will make hope real for blood cancer patients. It will improve the way lymphoma is diagnosed, give patients better treatment choices and will immediately start saving lives.

“Genomics involves testing the patient’s blood to look for critical gene mutations known to play a role in cancer. If found, the patient can be diverted to a new treatment – or enrolled in a clinical trial – to access drugs known to work against cancers involving these specific mutations.

“In order to provide this useful information, multiple genes – sometimes as many as 50 to 100 – need to be tested simultaneously using a technique known as ‘next generation sequencing’.

“This new approach requires cutting-edge and highly specialised laboratory processes, instrumentation and computing power.”

Peter Mac chief executive Dale Fisher said the donation represented a significant expansion of Peter Mac’s genomics capability with benefits for patients, clinicians and scientists.

“Peter Mac offers its sincerest thanks to Christine and Bruce, and their immediate family, for their generous contribution and making all of this possible. Across our organisation we are focused on putting the patient at the centre of everything we do, and the work evolving from this donation is a wonderful example of this.”

Associate Professor David Westerman, who will lead the research project, said the advancement of genomics would eventually eliminate the need for chemotherapy in treating cancer.

“With this partnership between research, clinical, university and philanthropy, we are now able to fast-track genetic testing to more patients and monitor the effectiveness of treatments,” Westerman said.

“Genomics and personalised medicine is what will aid targeted, less toxic cancer treatments.”

The [Snowdome Foundation](#) is accepting further donations towards the \$10 million funding goal.



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Lina Caneva has been a journalist for more than 35 years, and Editor of Pro Bono Australia News since it was founded in 2000.

