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Just announced - 2024 Viertel research awards to tackle society's major health changes

Viertel Foundation awards \$4.125 million to three of Australia's top medical researchers

Major illnesses including cancer, infectious diseases and respiratory problems, for example, impact millions of Australians each year and are top priority for some of the country's best medical researchers.

Millions of dollars have been committed to the work of three Australian medical researchers to further their efforts in fighting cancer, lung disease, and malaria through one of Australia's largest medical grants.

More than \$4 million has been awarded to three Australian medical researchers through the Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation Senior Medical Research Fellowships in association with Bellberry Ltd.

The 2024 Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellows, who will each receive \$1.375 million over five years to support their work, are:

1. **Dr Marcel Doerflinger** – working to revolutionise treatment for lung infections
2. **Dr Rhea Longley** – developing effective surveillance of malaria
3. **Dr Luke Isbel** – addressing and unlocking new cancer treatments.

Since establishment, the Viertel Foundation has awarded 63 Senior Medical Research Fellowships ensuring important medical and health conditions and their treatments, can be researched.

"As Australians, one way or another we have all been helped by the dedicated efforts of our medical research community," said Jodi Kennedy, General Manager of Philanthropy and Community Trustee Services at Equity Trustees.

"Their single-minded goal to solve Australia's health challenges is enhanced by the availability of generous funding, helping them to make in-roads into some of society's most challenging health conditions, via life changing medical research projects."

"The legacy left by Sylvia and Charles Viertel more than 30 years ago means that as one of the largest philanthropic funders of medical research in Australia, Equity Trustees is always working with the medical research sector to ensure funding is directed to make the greatest impact on the health issues we have, now and into the future."

Bellberry's CEO Kylie Sproston said: "Congratulations to the sixth Bellberry-Viertel Fellow, Dr Marcel Doerflinger. Bellberry is proud to collaborate with the Viertel Foundation to offer these prestigious fellowships."

"We know that providing five years of funding certainty to some of Australia's most promising mid-career researchers makes a huge difference. It's an investment that is positive not just for the individual, but often provides enormous benefits to the broader community," added Ms Sproston.



Professor Christina Mitchell AO, who is Co-Chair of the Viertel Foundation's Medical Advisory Board, along with Associate Professor Paul Ekert, said all of the candidates for 2024 were outstanding and exemplars of the high quality research talent that the Foundation supports.

"Our congratulations go to all the applicants and their inspiring submissions to the Advisory Board. It is always difficult to choose the winners from such a talented group," said Professor Mitchell.

"We are very proud and happy for this year's recipients of the Viertel Foundation awards and are extremely pleased to play our part in supporting these talented researchers together with their life-changing and invaluable research."

The Viertel Foundation is managed in partnership with co-trustees Justice Debra Mullins AO (Chair), Paul de Silva and Peter Evans, and is one of Australia's largest charitable foundations, established with an initial bequest of approximately \$60 million. Today the Foundation is worth around \$250 million and distributes approximately \$9 million annually.

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

FELLOWSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARIES

Dr Marcel Doerflinger, WEHI (Bellberry-Viertel Fellow)

Tuberculosis (TB) remains the deadliest infectious disease worldwide, killing one person every 20 seconds, with drug-resistant strains posing a significant public health threat. Current TB vaccines offer incomplete protection, and the lengthy, toxic antibiotic treatments required often lead to poor compliance, further fuelling the rise of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Without new, innovative treatments, millions of people could die each year from AMR-related infections.

Dr Doerflinger's research seeks to address this challenge by developing RNA-based therapies that manipulate the body's own defence mechanisms—specifically, a process known as programmed cell death. Rather than directly targeting bacteria with antibiotics, which can lead to resistance, these therapies focus on enhancing the body's immune response.

Dr Rhea Longley, WEHI (Viertel Fellow)

Malaria remains a major global public health problem affecting about 249 million people a year. Substantial challenges persist to achieving the World Health Organization's ambitious goal of malaria elimination. Nearly all countries in the Asia-Pacific and Americas have committed to eliminating malaria by 2030 but realising this aim requires the strengthening of control programs and development of innovative new tools to target these neglected species.

Effective surveillance is the most critical step in the final stages of elimination, otherwise transmission can rebound with devastating consequences. Unfortunately, settings poised for elimination are also the most challenging for surveillance due to the inefficiency of detecting infections when there are low case numbers. Dr Longley's research will address these gaps by expanding knowledge of naturally acquired immune responses following malaria infections, to develop new tools and approaches to accelerate malaria elimination.

Dr Luke Isbel, University of Adelaide (Viertel Fellow)

Dr. Luke Isbel, a Group Leader for the Molecular Epigenetics Laboratory at the South Australian Immunogenomics Cancer Institute (SAiGENCI), University of Adelaide, is leading a pioneering research project that could revolutionise how we treat cancer. The project, Targeting Epigenetic Regulation of Transcription Factors in Cancer, aims to explore new ways to combat cancer by focusing on epigenetics—how our cells control the activity of genes—and its influence on a key group of proteins known as transcription factors.



Unfortunately, these proteins have been notoriously difficult to target with existing cancer therapies. Dr. Isbel and his team are exploring a novel approach: instead of directly targeting these transcription factors, they aim to influence the epigenetic processes that control them, opening up exciting new possibilities for treatment.

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