Thursday October 4, 2007

Media Statement

WA RESEARCHERS SHARE IN $5M TO HELP SOLVE BREAST CANCER PUZZLE

WA researchers will play a part in a national project aimed at helping prevent breast cancer, as well as uncover new treatments and boosting existing treatments for patients.

The project, involving Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) Professor Peter Leedman has received $5 million funding as part of a package announced today (Thursday October 4) by the National Breast Cancer Foundation.

NBCF CEO Ms Sue Murray said the Foundation had approved $10 million in funding for two new long-term research projects, involving more than 44 researchers, that aimed to change the face of breast cancer research in Australia.

It is the first time in Australia that this level of funding has been committed to breast cancer research. The two National Collaborative Breast Cancer Research Grant projects, to receive $5 million each over the next five years, involve:

- Creating a new detection technology that may be better than mammography – and may be as easy as a blood test. Using nanotechnology and molecular genetics, this technology would have a major impact on early detection and treatment of advanced breast cancer patients (led by Prof Matt Trau, University of Queensland).

- Studying the body's nuclear receptors to discover and fast-track information to help with prevention, new treatments and boosting existing treatments (led by Associate Professor Christine Clarke of the Westmead Millenium Institute).

"It was a key recommendation of the NBCF's National Plan that if we want to speed up our efforts to answer the big questions in breast cancer, then the NBCF should be funding larger-scale, longer-term projects," Ms Murray said.

"The two projects we have selected are bold and involve the collaboration of some of Australia's best researchers – breast cancer experts along with scientific leaders in other fields who can substantially add to our knowledge of the disease, and hopefully make a real difference in the lives of women with breast cancer," she said.

Professor Leedman, who's played a key role in driving the establishment of the nuclear receptors research project, said it aimed to determine which members of the nuclear receptor family (there are 40 to 50 types) play a role in breast cancer.

"If we can understand the role of nuclear receptors in breast cancer, we may be able to tap into new treatments for the disease that affects so many Australian women every year," he said.

Want to help boost vital funds for breast cancer research? Monday October 22 is Pink Ribbon Day –for more information on how you can help, go to www.pinkribbon.org.au

About the National Collaborative Breast Cancer Research Grants inaugural projects:

Creating a better early detection tool will save lives

Professor Matt Trau says that for women who have been treated for breast cancer, one of their greatest fears is that the cancer will return, and spread to other parts of their bodies.

A key aspect of this $5 million project – which also involves Australia's leading epigeneticist (Assoc Prof Susan Clark) and leading breast cancer surgeon and clinical trials expert (Prof John Forbes) - will be to try to develop a blood test that will give early indication whether or not cancer has returned.

"Rather than having to wait anxiously to see if another lump or symptoms return, we hope to develop a blood test that would tell patients early if the cancer has returned, so they can receive treatment quickly and with more likelihood of a successful outcome," Professor Trau said.

"Identification and treatment of women with early stage breast cancer, who are at risk of developing advanced breast cancer, remains a significant dilemma in breast cancer management. Our program aims to address this issue, because currently once a woman has advanced breast cancer, the prognosis is poor."

Seeking quick answers for advanced breast cancer patients

Associate Professor Christine Clarke congratulated the NBCF for boldly kickstarting a promising new area of research by funding the nuclear receptor project she will lead.

"This grant literally means a huge boost in the number of researchers in Australia who will be working on solving breast cancer. The priority of our program will be to decrease the impact of breast cancer in women who are less well served by current treatments," she said.

Nuclear receptors have received little attention from breast cancer researchers but are known to control almost every action of life. The team aims to find which members of the nuclear receptor family (there are 40 to 50 types) play a role in breast cancer. It's a massive undertaking involving experts in breast cancer and a range of other leaders in different research fields.

"It is already known that nuclear receptors interact with each other, and that the estrogen receptor plays an important role in breast cancer, therefore there's a good chance that receptor is "talking" to other nuclear receptors in breast cancer – and we want to discover that conversation," she said.

"A lot of these nuclear receptors are already targeted in other diseases and drugs are already available to treat people with conditions as diverse as diabetes and acne – so if we discover new networks of nuclear receptors that are vital in breast cancer, it may be that treatments are available via drugs already existing – this is very exciting, and would be a massive advantage for patients who right now might not have a treatment option," Associate Professor Clarke said.

Media contact:

WAIMR Media Consultant
Natalie Papadopoulos on 0407 984 435

National Breast Cancer Foundation
Georgina Michael on 02 92994090 or 0421 040 721