China has joined the global fight to eradicate genetic disease by pledging around US$300 million to establish a new institute to directly contribute to the work of the Human Variome Project (HVP).

The HVP is an international consortium of clinicians, geneticists and researchers from more than 30 countries which aims to integrate the systematic collection and sharing of genetic variant information into routine clinical practice. It is led by FNI’s Professor Richard Cotton, a world renowned expert in genetic variation detection and data collection.

With a quarter of the world’s population, there is a huge amount of genetic diversity within China. The new institute, based in Beijing, will leverage that diversity to build new (and supplement existing) databases that catalogue genetic variation within genes implicated in hundreds of genetic diseases.

The Chinese contribution represents the largest investment towards the project to date. “This is not your average research project,” said Professor Cotton.

“It’s literally hundreds, if not thousands of projects around the world that are all contributing to the one vision. This contribution represents around a 25% investment in the project.”

Sir Gustav Nossal, a long term supporter of the HVP, said “We are all interested in what makes up a person – but we’re even more interested in what makes people different. That’s one of the reasons we’re all so fascinated by identical twins, we marvel at the likeness. Well, the reasons for differences between people are mutations in the genes. That’s why we need the Human Variome Project.”
DIRECTOR’S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

2011 is certainly going to be a very exciting year for brain research in Melbourne! Our first staff members will move into the brand new Austin building in late March and we are holding an official opening ceremony there on June 24. With the new Siemens 3 tesla MRI machine in place and audio-visual equipment and computers being installed as we speak, the facility is looking magnificent.

We can also announce that the Kenneth Myer Lecture will be held this year on October 4, once again at the Melbourne Convention & Exhibition Centre at Docklands. Our guest speaker this year is David Atwell, a magnificent communicator and world expert on how the brain actually works.

Start of the new year always means the start to new science, and this year I am pleased to announce The Australian Research Council (ARC) will fund a new collaborative research initiative to support stem cell science through the ARC’s Special Research Initiatives (SRI) scheme. The Australian Government has committed to fund this initiative up to $21 million for a period of seven years.

In conjunction with the Universities of Melbourne, Queensland and Monash, Professor Martin Pera will drive the scheme from our new Parkville campus, and will build Australia’s human capacity in stem cell science by conducting innovative, collaborative and internationally competitive research.

After the discovery that stem cells could be created from any part of the body, there has been enormous development in research over the past five years. As stem cells contribute to the improvement of neurological diseases such as MS, Alzheimers, stroke and Parkinsons, the scheme is an important tool in discovering new treatments for these conditions.

With these great opportunities on the horizon, I personally look forward to the year’s challenges with enthusiasm, and welcome you to join us along the way.

Professor Geoffrey Donnan, Director, Florey Neuroscience Institutes

MAJOR BENEFACCTORS VISIT AUSTIN

Professor Geoffrey Donnan and FNI Board Chair Charles Allen AO recently led a party of very special supporters on a sneak preview of the new Austin building, now nearing completion.

Lady Primrose Potter AC and her daughter Primrose Krasicki were accompanied by Myer Foundation CEO Christine Edwards as they donned hard hats and fluoro jackets to dodge builders and dangling electrical cables on a tour around the building.
Once again, FNI scientists have been recognised for their outstanding research by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

A/Prof Tony Hannan and Dr Jhodie Duncan both received ARC fellowships, and Tony Hannan received an NHMRC grant as well. A/Prof Andrew Gundlach, who leads Relaxin-3 research in the Peptide Neurobiology group, and A/Prof Steve Petrou, head of the Epilepsy division, also received NHMRC research fellowships.

Dr Lachlan Thompson, Head of Stem Cell Therapies in the Stem Cell, Neurodevelopment and Repair research group, received the NHMRC Career Development Award.

We are delighted to announce that FNI officially launched its long-awaited and colourful new website on January 17, 2011.

Not only does it look great, the site’s functionality allows users to easily navigate their way through each Division and laboratory, current projects and the latest news and events. Importantly, general visitors and our supporters will be able to download video links and make gifts online.

Information will be updated on a weekly basis, keeping everyone constantly informed on our latest scientific news and upcoming projects.

We hope you take the time to visit! www.florey.edu.au

Imagine that you are sick, but none of your doctors know why. Your symptoms suggest that you have a rare genetic disease, and you’ve been tested for a mutation in the gene responsible, but the results are inconclusive. The laboratory found a change in your genetic sequence, but is unable to confirm if it is causing your symptoms. And so, your doctors (and your insurance company) are unwilling to prescribe the expensive course of drugs needed to control your symptoms.

More than 6,000 diseases can be caused by a mutation in a single gene, and it is estimated that 1 child in every 200 born will suffer from one of them. Add the number of cancers that have an inherited genetic component, and the chances of you (or someone you know) being in this position is quite high.

Today it is feasible to sequence the genome of every patient presenting with a chronic condition; over the past decade, the cost of a whole-genome sequence has dropped from several billion dollars to a few thousand. But this is useless if we cannot determine whether the variations present in a sequence actually have an effect on human health. The HVP is designed to share information on genetic variation and its consequences, and embed this into routine clinical practice.
Charityworks for MS recently joined the MS Research team at Florey Neuroscience Institutes to celebrate a magnificent $214,560 raised at their bi-annual gala ball.

The glittering black tie event was held at Melbourne’s Crown Palladium last August and more than 900 guests enjoyed a three course dinner, music entertainment, live and silent auctions along with plenty of dancing throughout the night – all in aid of MS research and respite care.

Charityworks for MS comprises a committee of dedicated volunteers, originally inspired by dynamic Hawthorn mum and hostess Lina Marrocco in 2002.

Lina was diagnosed with MS several years ago, and her aim is to raise significant funds for research into this debilitating condition by producing a memorable and high quality event every two years. She has succeeded beyond her wildest dreams, with a staggering $551,000 raised to date.

Because Charityworks for MS takes no overheads or administrative costs, every dollar that was raised on the night went directly to supporting MS research and respite care.

Professors Geoff Donnan and Trevor Kilpatrick presented Lina and her team with a framed Certificate of Appreciation for their wonderful contribution to advancing our understanding of this most mysterious condition.

Charityworks for MS surpasses itself

Addiction pamphlet fills a gap

FNI’s Dr Robyn Brown spent a portion of last year collaborating pro bono with Melbourne-based drug and alcohol treatment centre Voyage on developing a pamphlet explaining the neuroscience of addiction. Their aim was to empower clients in making better informed decisions about their substance use, and to help family members understand the neuroscience of addiction.

Simple sentence structure and basic vocabulary were used to accommodate a range of cognitive functioning. The information acknowledges behaviour and relapse, but focuses on the potential for change. Robyn and co-presenter David Eckel subsequently attended an addiction treatment conference to present their project and have received lots of interest.

Clients loved the pamphlet so much that 10,000 copies have been re-printed and will be made available to other treatment providers throughout Australia and elsewhere.

If you’d like a copy, please contact David at Voyage on david.eckel@isispc.com.au
NEW BUILDINGS ON TRACK

The new buildings in Heidelberg and Parkville are powering along, and the first staff members will move into the Melbourne Brain Centre at the near completed, $40 million Austin campus on March 21.

With the new Siemens 3 tesla MRI machine in place and audio-visual equipment and computers being installed, the facility is looking magnificent. Deep cleaning is in progress, with glass sparkling and carpets free of plaster dust.

The labs promise a new era for staff shifting from antiquated environments at the Repat. The 180 people set to move will be surrounded by a contemporary work environment with strong green credentials. Motion sensors activate lighting and walls of opening windows provide natural heating, cooling and light. The warm colours are said to relax workers and are believed to encourage creative thinking.

According to Professor Graeme Jackson: “The inevitable result of the new environment will be growth of knowledge and opportunities. We are internationally competitive with our techniques, but this move will embed us into the clinical and basic neuroscience environments here at Austin and in Parkville.”

MIND OVER MATTER

Following a minor car accident at only 19, FNI bequestor Sherry (Jillian) Pratt was expected to die, and her brain was sought for medical research. However, with her own mother’s devotion to support her, the pregnant young mother virtually willed herself to recover and went on to lead a full and useful life. This has been very challenging along the way because she had virtually no memory of or emotional attachment to her husband, children and parents.

Sherry today has a wonderful sense of humour, irony and joy of life, but continues to suffer from short term memory loss. In a twist of fate, she recently donated her brain to the Victorian Brain Bank Network, 40 years after they were going to take it away from her!

“When I see a good movie or read a good book, I am lucky in that I can do it all over again as many times as I want because I have completely forgotten about it almost straight away!” she chuckles.

“But the great news is that I can now remember that I have forgotten things sometimes!”

Today, Sherry likes to imagine a world without brain disease. But she has also taken action. She feels empowered and comforted knowing that this one simple act in her lifetime – of making a gift or bequest in her Will – can have far-reaching benefits to others in years to come.

If you would like to have a chat about how you too can make a difference to those who are suffering from brain disease or trauma, please phone our friendly Bequest Officer John Macdonald on 9035 8624.
THANK YOU TO THOSE WHO HAVE GENEROUSLY DONATED TO THE FLOREY NEUROSCIENCE INSTITUTES BETWEEN OCTOBER 2010 AND FEBRUARY 2011. LISTED BELOW ARE THOSE WHO KINDLY DONATED $250 OR MORE.

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IN MEMORIAM. WE GREATLY APPRECIATE ALL THE GIFTS WE HAVE RECEIVED IN MEMORY OF LOVED ONES. THOSE REMEMBERED HERE ARE: MR HECTOR DE PAOLI, KATHLEEN HIGGINS, DR WILBUR HARVEY, JOAN LEACH. BIRTHDAY GIFT. DEBBIE GRACE FROM SIX OF HER FRIENDS.

L-R, Jordan Wright, Justine Paragreen (nee Browne), Michael Paragreen and Ian Browne

LOIS BROWNE AWARD

The Lois Browne Award was established by the family of the late Lois Browne, who suffered from Multiple System Atrophy (MSA) until her passing on 31st of March 2010.

Valued at $2,000, this Award is open to a high-performing post-graduate student who is investigating Parkinson’s disease or PD related disorders within FNI. The inaugural award was presented to FNI’s Jordan Wright for his dedication and ongoing research into Neurodegeneration. This opportunity has allowed Jordan to travel to Italy to further his studies into neurology. We thank the Browne family for their generosity in establishing this initiative.