



KIRBY INSTITUTE

Annual Report
2019



UNSW
SYDNEY



Kirby Institute



The Kirby Institute
is a world leading health
research organisation
working to eliminate
infectious diseases, globally.

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Participants of the inaugural Cooper HIV/AIDS Research Training (CHART) Program with mentors and program coordinators.

MESSAGE FROM OUR PATRON

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

The 2019 annual report records exceptional achievements in exceptional circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic that has ravaged the world has demanded the attention of us all, including least the outstanding researchers at the Kirby Institute. They have quickly adapted to new public health measures. Many have embarked on completely new projects, aimed at combatting the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 disease. I thank them for their innovation. It is reassuring that the fight against this unexpected pandemic, which began in 2019, is in such capable and committed hands, including in Australia.

Before the pandemic struck, 2019 was witness to many noteworthy accomplishments recorded in this report. The year commenced with the appointment of Professor Anthony Kelleher as the Kirby Institute's new Director. Already a respected leader, both within the Institute and beyond, he is a globally recognised academic and scientist. He has advanced the vision established by our inaugural Director, the late David Cooper AC, whilst tackling new boundaries and facing new challenges with dedication and skill. I congratulate Professor Kelleher on a successful first year as Director. This has been especially impressive given the enormous challenges that arrived with COVID-19 pandemic.

The international D²EFT trial, a large international clinical trial designed to optimise second line HIV treatment, expanded into Guinea during the year. It marked the first time a randomised controlled trial has ever taken place in the Guinean health system. This is a great achievement to which the Kirby Institute contributed, whilst helping to enhance the capacity of Guinea's health system and its dedicated workers facing huge responsibilities. Truly, this is a way to share Australia's experience with the world.

The Cooper HIV/AIDS Research Training (CHART) Program was launched in 2019. CHART is training the next generation of HIV researchers for the Asia-Pacific region. The program is named in honour of David Cooper. His vision was to build up research capacity in our region. This goal is being realised. In August 2019 nine participants travelled from the Philippines, Myanmar, South Korea and Indonesia to the Kirby Institute. They were mentored by talented researchers from across the Institute. This is an initiative that is a testament to the ongoing global impact of the Institute, particularly within our home region.

The accomplishments of the Kirby Institute's researchers have been recognised as outstanding in the year under report. Virginia Wiseman, a leading health economist, was promoted to Professor. Professor Rebecca Guy received a NSW Tall Poppy Science Award for her globally-recognised surveillance work on HIV and STIs.

The Kirby Institute's renowned leaders in hepatitis C research and elimination, led by Professor Greg Dore, hosted a meeting with colleagues from around the world to tackle this global challenge. They exchanged experiences and the results of investigations, for the first meeting of the NHMRC-funded ASCEND Program Grant. They are working closely with people who inject drugs, in order to understand and address their health needs in ways that are at once principled and effective.

The foregoing are just a sample of the wide-ranging achievements of the Kirby Institute and its personnel in 2019. Whilst tackling new challenges, the Kirby Institute has continued its core projects of national significance – as the most respected centre of research and reporting on the ongoing challenge of the HIV pandemic in Australia. Under Anthony Kelleher's direction, the brilliant team of researchers and professional staff will continue to meet new and unexpected health challenges head-on.

Our overall goal at the Kirby Institute is the attainment of the human right of access to health for all. Nature and society may throw new challenges and obstacles at us. However, these only make us more determined than ever to rise to each crisis. And to push forward the frontiers of knowledge using the lessons we have learned, and taught, in the context of the HIV pandemic: World class research excellence. Help to the most needy. And close engagement with all who are affected by health challenges, new and old.



“Our overall goal at the Kirby Institute is the attainment of the human right of access to health for all.”

MESSAGE FROM OUR DIRECTOR

Professor Anthony Kelleher

The launch of the 2019 annual report is occurring at a time when our way of living and working has shifted dramatically. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact, but as an infectious disease research centre, I believe we have responded quickly and effectively to this challenge. I am proud of our team of dedicated and talented researchers who have adapted to these extraordinary circumstances.

It is important to reflect on what was a significant and successful year for the Kirby Institute. 2019 was my first year in the role of Kirby Institute Director, and I am grateful to everyone at the Kirby Institute and beyond who supported my transition into the role.

One of the primary tasks of the year was finalising and implementing the strategic plan; a process that commenced two years prior with extensive consultation. At the same time, our world-leading researchers continued their impactful work with excellence.

We continue to have a significant impact in our country and region, across a broad spectrum of infectious diseases. Central to this is our approach to equitable partnership with local institutions. We are proud to work alongside leading and emerging clinician researchers through our Myanmar-Australia Research Collaboration for Health (MARCH). Utilising the laboratories named in David Cooper's honour and with academic leaders from the University of Medicine 2 (UM2) in Yangon, the collaboration has seen the development of a talented team of young Myanmar health professionals who are working to address the particular health needs of their communities.

Likewise, the Cooper HIV/AIDS Research Training (CHART) Program commenced, and we were delighted to welcome the nine emerging research leaders from four countries in our region. In addition, the Australian Research Council has funded the establishment of a Research Hub to Combat Antimicrobial Resistance in the Asia-Pacific region. Led by Professor Rebecca Guy, the Hub will focus on sexually transmissible infections as an example of the growing resistance to antibiotics. The Hub will bring together over 20 organisations from Australia and our region to address this important and growing health threat.

The Kirby Institute also enjoyed significant success through a number of Investigator, Synergy, Partnership and Program grants being funded through the highly competitive NHMRC schemes. This breadth and depth of success is an unequivocal affirmation of the innovation, quality and impact of our research teams.

Earlier in 2019, we also took pause to remember Professor David Cooper AC, our inaugural director, one year on from his tragic passing. David's vision for accessible health is embedded in the Kirby Institute's DNA, and we are proud to carry it forward. Through the establishment of the David Cooper Memorial Fund, we have the opportunity to award the David Cooper Postgraduate Research Scholarship in the near future. And our boardroom, named in his honour, will fittingly be a place where the seeds of new projects and approaches to health will continue to be sown.

As we have seen in 2020, infectious diseases have a truly global impact. We will continue to forge ahead, leveraging the Kirby Institute's extensive capabilities and talent to enable effective health solutions for all.



“This breadth and depth of success is an unequivocal affirmation of the innovation, quality and impact of our research teams.”

OUR PURPOSE

Ensure no infectious disease is left unchallenged

We work to eliminate infectious diseases, globally. Focused in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, our work improves and protects human health, wellbeing and ability to thrive.

OUR VISION

A world free of infectious disease

At the Kirby Institute, we are relentless in our pursuit of a world free of infectious disease. We do this by developing innovative prevention strategies, tests, treatments, cures, and approaches to implementing them.

OUR VALUES

Equity

We believe all people deserve equal access to high quality, accessible, and appropriate health care – no matter who they are, where they were born, or which communities they belong to.

Impact

We work with people, for people. Our research is translatable by design, meaning it is conducted in such a way as to have the strongest possible impact on real world healthcare practice and policy.

Collaboration

We work with a diverse range of partners, including affected individuals and communities, industry, medical practitioners, other research organisations and governments in Australia and abroad. This results in better informed research and more effective solutions.

Excellence

We are committed to producing research that is innovative, rigorous and reliable. Our excellence in research not only serves to inform the best possible solutions; it elevates our work to the global stage where it can transform health and save lives.

OUR APPROACH

The Kirby Institute is a world-leading health research institute at UNSW Sydney that works to eliminate infectious diseases, globally. Our specialisation is in developing health solutions to reach the most at-risk communities and by doing so, building a safer, healthier world for everyone.

Around the world, significant amounts of time, effort and money have been invested in eliminating the most harmful infectious diseases of our times. This work has resulted in incredible advances in scientific and medical research, impressive success stories, and of course, the saving of millions of human lives.

Yet despite progress to date, human beings remain fragile to the threat of infectious disease – especially new infections for which our bodies have not yet developed immunity. Urgent questions remain for old infectious diseases, while new viruses pose unknown problems. It is why we pursue our ultimate goal of a world free from infectious disease.

Infectious diseases significantly impact on human health, wellbeing and ability to thrive. And while all of us are potentially susceptible to their harms, they disproportionately affect individuals and communities who are already marginalised, particularly those who are geographically and/or socially isolated, or whose behaviours or professions are culturally stigmatised.

At the Kirby Institute, we believe all people deserve equal access to high quality, accessible health care – no matter who they are, where they were born, or which communities they belong to.

We also know that responding to infectious disease is an urgent, critical need. Just like humans, infectious diseases constantly evolve to survive their environment and to evade elimination. This knowledge drives us to be just as relentless in our search for effective treatments and cures.

The good news is we have many of the ingredients for success: a proven approach and method, teams of highly skilled, passionate people, and an inspiring legacy to propel us forward. Being part of the Faculty of Medicine at UNSW Sydney, we're well positioned to act nationally, as well as beyond our borders to positively impact the Asia-Pacific region and further abroad.

Our approach to solving the problem of infectious disease is tried and true. It successfully met the challenge of the HIV emergency in the 1980s, turning the tide of this terrible disease in just an astounding three decades, from a terminal diagnosis to a manageable chronic illness.

How do we do it? The underlying concept is surprisingly simple – just as infectious diseases work by spreading through individuals, communities and populations, our team of world class experts distribute solutions by starting with the people at the heart of the issue. Starting there – with those most at risk and/or affected by infectious disease – means that we are able to develop precision interventions for populations, i.e. the most accessible, appropriate and effective tests, treatments and cures possible for each community, and from there get them into the hands of those who need them the most.

By improving and protecting the health of the most vulnerable in our society as our highest priority – those with the highest barriers to achieving positive health outcomes – we are ultimately creating a healthier, safer world for everyone.



2019 BY THE NUMBERS



4 NHMRC
Program Grants



17 NHMRC
Project Grants



8 NHMRC
Partnership Grants



28 NHMRC
Fellowships



2 ARC Discovery
Projects



3 NHMRC Centres of
Research Excellence Grants

\$35,281,285

funding from external grants
in 2019

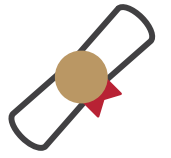
\$549,284

in donor funding in 2019



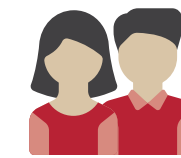
293

staff members



6

academic promotions



80

postgraduate students
in total



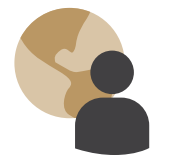
14

new postgraduate students
who started in 2019



20

UNSW Scientia
PhD students



45

international postgraduate
students from **25** countries



7

PhD graduations



41

Kirby Institute Seminar
Series talks held



680

collaborations in
48 countries on
6 continents



372

peer reviewed
publications in 2019

OUR ROADMAP

for a world free of infectious disease

In 2019, the Kirby Institute welcomed leading HIV researcher and clinician, Professor Anthony Kelleher as our new Director. He brings with him more than 20 years of infectious disease expertise, and a vision to take the Institute to new levels.

“Professor Kelleher was appointed through a rigorous international recruitment process,” said Professor Phillips, who was the Dean of Medicine at UNSW Sydney at the time.

“Tony is an accomplished and highly respected academic and clinician in the field of immunology and HIV research, with a long career in various leadership roles across the Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney and St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney.

“He will provide powerful leadership to carry forward the impactful and life-saving health research of the Kirby Institute.”

Professor Kelleher has worked at the Kirby Institute since 2001 and been a member of its Executive team since 2005. He is Head of the Immunovirology and Pathogenesis Program, which operates out of the Kirby Institute’s Glendonbrook Laboratories.

“It is a true honour to be named Director of the Kirby Institute and I am excited by the challenge of growing the impact of the Institute’s research even further by working closely with its strong academic and research support teams,” said Professor Kelleher.

“The Kirby Institute, its staff, collaborators, and the people and communities we serve, have been the inspirational core of my career. David Cooper, the Kirby Institute’s inaugural director, was an incomparable mentor and dear friend. I could not be prouder than to carry forward the Institute’s innovative and life-saving research.”

In 2019, Professor Kelleher hit the ground running as director, and quickly carried forward consultations to launch the Kirby Institute’s new strategic plan. The plan is designed to maximise the research capacity of the Kirby Institute to ensure the best possible outcomes for the communities impacted by the infectious diseases the Kirby Institute works on.

“The Kirby Institute is already a world-leading research centre, so it’s important that our strategy builds on these strengths,” he said. “We will build on and evolve our strengths and capabilities in preventing and treating infectious diseases more broadly both within Australia and overseas, using national and global strategic priorities to guide our strategic thinking. Our focus on marginalised populations is core to our research principles and our ability to provide expertise across the full spectrum of the research landscape will continue to be a key feature of the Kirby Institute’s research.”

Based on national and international health priorities and opportunities, the strategic plan also identifies key research areas to initiate or substantially expand, particularly those that complement the Institute’s existing capabilities.

“We are well placed to respond and adapt to emerging health challenges across our spectrum of research, as is evident in how we’ve rapidly adapted to conduct COVID-19 research,” said Professor Kelleher. “Other areas of expansion we’ve identified include HPV, hepatitis B, neglected tropical diseases, malaria, tuberculosis, antimicrobial resistance, biosecurity, drug user and justice health, and sexual, reproductive and maternal health. These are all areas where we already have a strong foundation of research networks, and the next few years will be about building them into larger programs of research.”

The plan was initiated in 2019 and will be reviewed at the end of 2023.

A FIVE-POINT PLAN TO TAKE THE KIRBY FORWARD

CONSOLIDATE

build on existing research strengths

EXPAND

extend research activities into new and related fields

COLLABORATE

sustain and develop collaborations and partnerships

TRANSLATE

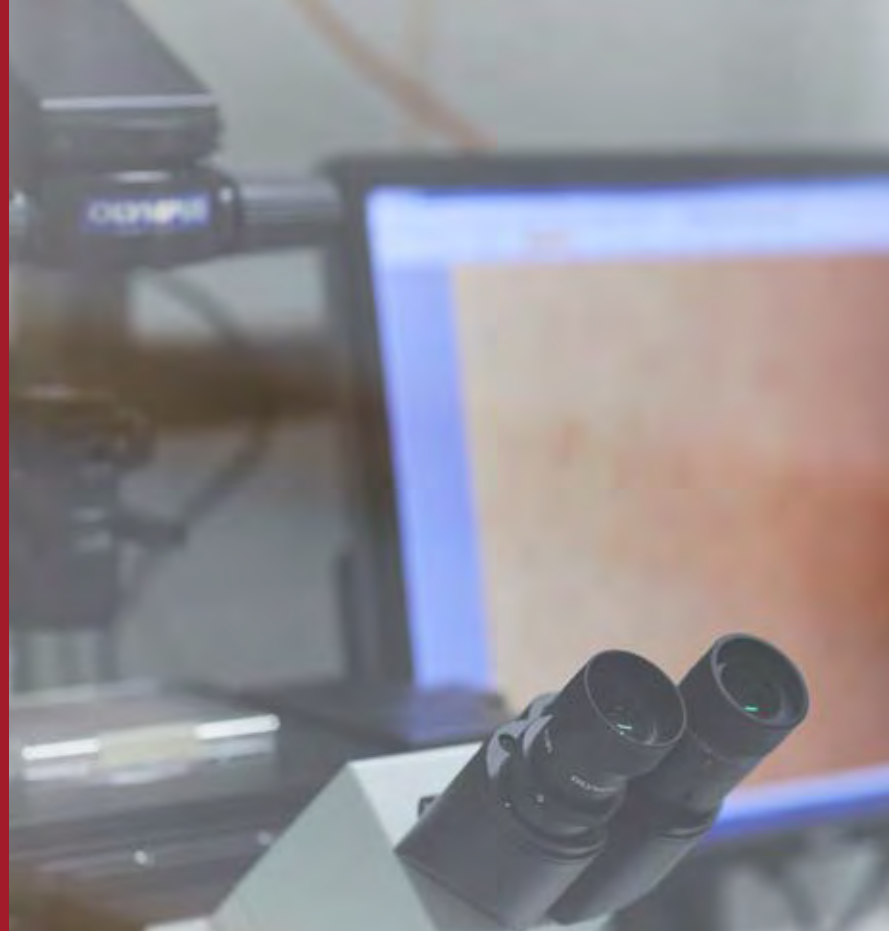
facilitate the rapid and effective application of research findings into new health system-wide innovations

SUPPORT

ensure that our organisational structure enables us to achieve and grow our research aspirations and strategy

In the final days of 2019, evidence began to emerge about a novel coronavirus. As we began to compile content for our 2019 annual report in the early months of 2020, the world was already a vastly different place. It quickly became clear that the Kirby Institute needed to dramatically transform and reorganise, so that we were in the best possible position to contribute our skills and expertise to the global fight against COVID-19. Before reading about our research achievements for 2019, these pages provide a summary of how we have rapidly adapted to COVID-19.

Professor Anthony Kelleher
Director, Kirby Institute



COVID-19

The Kirby Institute has a strong track-record in designing solutions to infectious disease threats that can be scaled for maximum impact across diverse communities and populations.

In early 2020, we urgently reviewed our ongoing and planned research studies, adapting them to ensure the safety of the patients and staff involved, while maintaining the integrity of the data gathered. Concurrently, we repurposed our laboratories and adapted our clinical and public health research strategies to address critical questions in the fight against COVID-19. Our work in this area expands every day. We identified critical collaborators with complementary skills to ensure the work progressed as rapidly as possible.

Our COVID-19 research is centred around three core areas: understand, intervene, implement; and is underpinned by the principle of working with at-risk communities.



Associate Professor Stuart Turville examining the SARS-CoV-2 virus through the microscope, with the image portrayed on the computer screen. Image: Richard Freeman/UNSW.

Understand

We need to know how SARS-CoV-2 works at a cellular and molecular level, how it spreads and who is most impacted by the spectrum of COVID-19 illnesses.

The Kirby Institute has a long history of highly impactful research in understanding, monitoring and predicting how infectious diseases move through individuals and communities. This understanding is critical to preventing SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) transmission and targeting treatment to the areas of greatest need.

In early 2020, our researchers set their sights on learning more about exactly how the virus is being transmitted between people, and why it makes some people very ill when they become infected, while many others have mild or even no symptoms.

In our laboratories, we examined swabs, blood and other samples from people who had been infected with SARS-CoV-2 to examine how the virus causes disease and what our bodies are doing to fight it off. In particular, we have worked with NSW Health Pathology and Lifeblood to screen plasma from recovered blood donors from across Australia for neutralising antibodies, which might underpin potential therapeutics.



Professor Raina MacIntyre is an infectious diseases expert and Professor in Global Biosecurity. She has been at the forefront of Australian media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In partnership with the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance and the Australian Red Cross Lifeblood, we undertook research to understand how widespread infection with SARS-CoV-2 is within the community.

Through our wide network of clinical and community collaborations, we established new cohort studies, which will help us understand how COVID-19 impacts particular populations and to discover critical information to guide clinical management of other infections or diseases, especially those that impact on the immune response such as HIV. We are rolling out these studies among people in aged care facilities, healthcare workers, people living with HIV and people who are immune suppressed. Samples from some cohorts, which will also enrol people who test negative for SARS-CoV-2, will help us understand the accuracy of antibody testing and the role of cross reactivity immunity to protection and disease progression.

Our teams of modellers are using mathematical models of COVID-19 transmission to make predictions about how COVID-19 affects different communities based on different scenarios. One project is forecasting the behaviour of COVID-19 infection in Australia's remote Aboriginal populations to understand how it might spread within and between isolated communities, and to evaluate the impact of a range of preventative strategies.

Dr Alberto Ospina Stella and Associate Professor Stuart Turville inside the Kirby Institute PC3 containment lab where they are working to grow the SARS-CoV-2 virus and determine how it responds to different treatments. Image: Richard Freeman/UNSW.



Intervene

We are developing potential treatments using antibodies, testing existing antiviral therapies to see if they are effective against COVID-19, and optimising ways to deliver successful treatments to complement the body's own immune response.

Building on our existing research strengths, we have focussed major efforts towards developing and testing potential treatments for COVID-19, which will complement the vaccine development that is being spearheaded by our collaborators.

We are currently exploring and developing antibody-based treatments for COVID-19 with researchers at the Garvan Institute of Medical Research. Antibodies are a part of a healthy human immune system. They form in response to an infection, or can be triggered or replicated by a successful vaccine or treatment. As SARS-CoV-2 is a new virus, the population does not have pre-existing protective antibodies.

These therapies have the potential to be used to stop people infected with SARS-CoV-2 from becoming severely ill, but also, as a tool to prevent infection in the first place. If a person has enough of these antibodies in their system, it could prevent SARS-CoV-2 from the latching onto cells in the body altogether.

A key part of developing any treatment or indeed vaccine for COVID-19 is to optimise the ways of delivering that treatment efficiently to the appropriate areas of the body, particularly the coverings of the airways and lungs. Building on our work on HIV and partnerships with the University of Melbourne, we are developing specialised nanoparticles that could deliver an antiviral COVID-19 gene therapy through an inhaler or puffer.

Another project will aim to rapidly develop molecular and cellular tools to help identify exactly how SARS-CoV-2 replicates in the body and to screen potential new therapies, which is critical to how we start the development of new therapies.

Implement

We are coordinating with communities on the ground and working with collaborators around the world to ensure rapid uptake of evidence-based health solutions.

As soon as our treatment options for COVID-19 pass pre-clinical testing we will utilise our existing global clinical trials networks to ensure they work to improve health in range of populations and settings. This network, called INSIGHT, spans over 100 clinical sites in more than 40 countries. We design our clinical trials collaboratively to encompass broad populations and diverse health systems, which ensures rapid and practical scale-up the moment a superior treatment option is identified.

Even with effective treatments, testing will remain a central component of any COVID-19 public health strategy for the foreseeable future. Together with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, the International Centre for Point of Care Testing at Flinders University, the Australian government and our industry partners we have devised strategies for the implementation of testing technologies, and leveraged these technologies for rapid diagnosis of COVID-19.

These 'point-of-care tests' are being rolled out in 85 health services in remote Aboriginal communities in Australia and will ensure test results are delivered within 45 minutes. In the case of a positive test, this buys critical time to isolate patients and their contacts and test for them for COVID-19, significantly reducing the potential for the spread of the infection in these communities, and if tested negative prevents unnecessary complicated medical transfers or evacuations to distant city hospitals.



2019
RESEARCH

**We fight disease
by spreading solutions.**

Infectious diseases work
by spreading through
individuals, communities
and populations.

We deliver solutions
the same way.

VIRAL HEPATITIS

Hepatitis impacts some of the world's most vulnerable communities, but life-saving preventions and treatments are not widely accessed. We work to ensure equitable access to hepatitis B and C prevention, treatment, and care.

This photo was taken in a residential addiction treatment centre. Alireza, middle, is a man who shared many stories about his life and his relationship with his family. His life has been dotted with episodes of domestic violence, juvenile and adult incarceration, drug use, and stigma and marginalisation. He was happy to be in a program where he felt supported and cared for, and began hepatitis C treatment. However, he stopped his treatment soon after he left the centre, and the researchers did not hear from him for months. The research team in Rafsanjan tracked him down and convinced him to come in for a hepatitis C test and restart treatment if still positive.



Dr Maryam Alavi is visiting Mohammad, who is a construction worker with advanced liver disease. He is on opioid agonist therapy and participated in the study through the public clinic where he goes daily to get methadone. Dr Alavi is speaking to his wife, who is his primary carer during hepatitis C treatment.

COMMUNITY-LED HEPATITIS C ELIMINATION IN IRAN

In Rafsanjan, Iran, Kirby Institute researchers are building a 'people for people' model for the elimination of hepatitis C, one city at a time.

The World Health Organization has set a target for global hepatitis C elimination by 2030, and in Australia we are well on the way to achieving this target.

But globally, achieving hepatitis C elimination targets will require innovative and practical strategies that can be adapted for each country, or even, as the Kirby Institute's Dr Maryam Alavi explains, from city to city.

"In Rafsanjan, we are testing a deeply community-led and community-integrated model for hepatitis C elimination," said Dr Alavi. "We are using services - like prisons, HIV clinics and opioid agonist therapy clinics that already exist in Rafsanjan - and we're tailoring them so that they can provide hepatitis C screening and treatment."

Rafsanjan has a population of approximately 200,000 people and prior to the Kirby Institute's work, had never had a program for managing hepatitis C, even though more than one in two people who inject drugs in Iran have the virus.

"There is a big gap in this city, and most cities in Iran," explained Dr Alavi. "There are good drug dependence services that provide good health information and advice, but when it comes to the next step, when people say 'how do I get tested for hepatitis C', 'how can I start treatment', they run into a brick wall. This is because these tests or treatments are completely unaffordable for the people who need them."

From the specialists to the streets

There is evidence from countries like Australia, that providing free access to curative hepatitis C direct acting antivirals leads to significant reductions in community prevalence of hepatitis C.

"A key learning from the evidence-base is that these treatments need to be promoted and administered in the community setting," said Professor Gregory Dore, who led a number of these studies and heads up the Viral Hepatitis Clinical Research Program at the Kirby Institute.

"There's no point offering hepatitis C treatments in fancy private clinics or hospitals, because most people living with this virus never come into contact with these services," he said. opioid

Based on this understanding, the intervention for the study in Rafsanjan is simple. Every person in Rafsanjan that accesses one of the existing community sites over an 18 month period will be offered a free hepatitis C test, and if their test is positive, they are immediately placed on life-saving, curative treatments - administered through the sites they are already accessing. The study is being conducted in collaboration with Tehran University of Medical Sciences.

The intervention is being rolled out across one prison, 35 public and private opioid agonist therapy clinics, four residential addiction treatment centres, a free walk-in integrated HIV and HCV clinic, and a mobile outreach service.

"We will compare hepatitis C prevalence, diagnosis and treatment uptake in Rafsanjan at the start of the trial, and then at one year after the intervention has been running," said Professor Dore. "We expect to see significant reductions in the community prevalence of hepatitis C over this time, which will provide both an Iran-based model, and an evidence base for broader access to hepatitis C treatment access across the country."

Microfinance for microelimination

While the intervention is relatively simple, the biggest challenge for hepatitis C elimination in a country like Iran is how to fund the costs of treatment and care. Drug user health is rarely prioritised by governments in high-income countries, let alone in resource poor settings, and Iran has unique challenges in importing diagnostics and medicines due to trade sanctions.

"It wasn't enough to have an innovative research idea, we needed an innovative way to pay for it," said Dr Alavi. "At the core, what we're trying to do with this study is improve the health of the people in one city; Rafsanjan. And so, we thought to ask the people of the city if they wanted to invest in this, and remarkably, they did."

Small and large businesses throughout Rafsanjan have pulled together and contributed the A\$275,000 needed to run the study. This includes large companies and charities, and small single person businesses, like Shayan Kav's business, who manufactures locks and other parts for cars.

"It is incredible to see the community response and ownership of this research," said Dr Alavi. "The people of this city are a community, they are united, and now they are co-designers in what might be the world's first microfinancing project for the elimination of hepatitis C."



Dr Maryam Alavi meeting with senior management of the study team at the Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences.



To reach people who experience homelessness, the research team needed to set up Rafsanjan's first mobile outreach service. The team visited different places where people gathered to use drugs, to meet with the community and talk about project, and hear their input about the service that was being designed for roll-out. In one of these visits, Dr Maryam Alavi met a participant who had finished his treatment in prison and needed to attend the clinic for his treatment response test. He had lost his referral letter, so Dr Alavi organised a new one and is explaining the details for him.

Not just a cure, a second chance

Hepatitis C can make people very ill, and in many cases is fatal, unless treatment is accessed. But the impact of hepatitis C infection is far more complex than just the disease. There is immense stigma associated with the infection and the drug use that often goes along with it. People living with hepatitis C are in cycles of disadvantage, made worse by discrimination and poverty.

"When you look at the whole spectrum of what these marginalised communities need in a country like Iran, their needs go well beyond hepatitis C. It goes beyond what we are doing for them," said Dr Alavi. "But curing their hepatitis C is an initial step. A lot of these people have almost given up, but this small change inspires them to think that they have hope to do something different with their lives."

From Rafsanjan to Iran

Rather than 'scale-up' which is a commonly used term in public health for when an intervention proves effective at a small scale, Dr Alavi refers to this model as one of 'scale out'.

"The model is community driven, so we can't just cut and paste it onto another city. But if we follow the same principles of working with local communities and services in building an intervention from the ground up, then we have a model that is scalable through adaptation," she said.

"Australia is a world leader in hepatitis C prevention and treatment. To be able to bring these lessons back to the people in the country where I was born is an incredible professional experience."



DR BEHZAD HAJARIZADEH

Dr Behzad Hajarizadeh is a Senior Lecturer at the Kirby Institute, and has been working as a clinician and researcher in the field of liver diseases. He is leading a number of key projects on viral hepatitis at the Kirby Institute.

"I am leading a research project that monitors and evaluates the uptake of new hepatitis C treatments called direct-acting antivirals. This involves liaising with people in all Australian states and territories, working with people living with hepatitis C and understanding patterns of prescribing across different doctor specialities," he said.

"This is extremely rewarding work. We're finding high levels of treatment uptake, which means people are living longer, healthier lives. We're also identifying gaps in access to treatment, and strategies to address them."



HEPATITIS C DECLINES AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS

The Australian Needle and Syringe Program Survey Report is produced each year by the Kirby Institute, and it monitors the prevalence of HIV and hepatitis C among people who inject drugs in Australia. This year's report showed that hepatitis C has declined by a staggering 60% since new hepatitis C cures were made available through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) in 2016.

"People who inject drugs are the major population at risk of hepatitis C in Australia, and thanks to forward-thinking and inclusive leadership from the Federal Government, people are able to access the cures at a low cost through the PBS," said Dr Jenny Iversen from the Kirby Institute's Viral Hepatitis Epidemiology and Prevention Program, and the lead author of the report.

A MODEL FOR HEPATITIS C ELIMINATION IN AUSTRALIAN PRISONS

It is estimated almost one in five of all people in Australian prisons have chronic hepatitis C infection. We now have treatments that cure hepatitis C in most people. Prisons are a venue with ongoing transmission of hepatitis C, so it is essential that we identify the best strategies both for prevention of infection and for the roll out of these new treatments in the complex prison environments.

In 2019, researchers from the Kirby Institute's Viral Immunology Systems Program developed a mathematical model to understand how improved access to antiviral treatment and harm reduction services would impact on hepatitis C transmissions and the burden of chronic hepatitis C in NSW prisons. They found that a moderate increase in access to treatment in the prison system, alongside improved access to harm reduction services, would make hepatitis C elimination possible in Australian prisons by 2030.

"As the prison sector is increasingly recognised to be key to national elimination efforts, these findings will inform our national strategy, and support Australia to become one of the first countries in the world to eliminate hepatitis C," said Professor Andrew Lloyd, Head of the Viral Immunology Systems Program.



In 2019, the Kirby Institute in collaboration with the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), hosted the first meeting of the new ASCEND Program Grant, an innovative new partnership designed to address issues of drug dependence and hepatitis C in unison.

Attended by global leaders in the hepatitis C elimination effort, researchers presented on a range of different studies and treatment models undertaken in the USA, UK, Iran, and Australia, to compare the effectiveness of different strategies across a range of contexts.

Above: Dr Natasha Martin (University of Bristol) **Left:** Professor Jason Grebely (Kirby Institute) **Below, left to right:** Professor Andrew Lloyd (Kirby Institute), Professor Louisa Degenhardt (NDARC), Professor Gregory Dore (Kirby Institute), Professor Michael Farrell (NDARC).



HIV

We have made major contributions to the health and lives of people impacted by HIV. We continue to work to prevent HIV transmission and to improve health outcomes for people living with HIV, in Australia and globally.

Hannah Law and Melanie Mach, higher degree research students from our Immunovirology and Pathogenesis Program, working in the Kirby Institute's Glendonbrook Laboratories.



Associate Professor Stuart Turville and his team in the Kirby Institute's Glendonbrook Laboratories.

IN SEARCH OF AN HIV CURE

Gene therapy is a technique that manipulates genes to prevent or treat disease, instead of using medication or surgery. It could be especially useful for illnesses that have no other cure, and so is being explored by Kirby Institute researchers as part of the global quest for an HIV cure. The research is based on the idea of recalibrating the “nuts and bolts” of the HIV virus in a safe and effective way to genetically modify immune cells in various ways to enable a cure for HIV.

“The aim is to turn the virus against itself,” said Associate Professor Stuart Turville, who is leading the research in the Kirby Institute's Glendonbrook Laboratories. “We will use the virus, but we need to reprogram it, so that it's not only safe, but is full of genetic materials that are programmed to attack the virus.”

Associate Professor Turville has been working on gene therapy for HIV since joining the Kirby Institute in 2011. In collaboration with Dr Geoff Symonds at CSL, the Kirby Institute is one of only a few centres worldwide leveraging the power of gene therapy and gene editing technologies to target the virus in the body.

The work conducted during this time has proven promising, and this year, the Federal Minister for Health Greg Hunt announced a more than \$800,000 funding boost from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), who administer the majority of government health research funding.

“This grant is now applying the culmination of over eight years of work at the bench to design a gene delivery platform for our immune system,” said Associate Professor Turville.

In applying this work, he says the researchers are aiming firstly to permanently protect immune cells from future infection. The second aim is to arm the immune system to seek and destroy what remains of the HIV reservoir.

“Unlike existing therapies using drugs, our approach is to use gene therapy to enable a living therapeutic that will dynamically respond over time,” said Associate Professor Turville. “We are hopeful that this innovative approach will unlock some of unknown elements of HIV and ultimately lead to an effective cure.”



The D²EFT Team with colleagues in Guinea.

EXPANDING CLINICAL TRIALS RESEARCH INTO GUINEA

A major capacity building initiative is underway in Guinea, where Kirby Institute researchers are working for the first time as part of the international D²EFT trial – a randomised controlled trial covering 14 countries on three continents, seeking the most effective second-line HIV treatment for those who fail first-line therapy.

A team from the Therapeutic and Vaccine Research Program travelled to Conakry, Guinea to open the new Guinean D²EFT arm at Donka National Hospital, and it is believed to be the first randomised controlled trial ever conducted in the Guinean health system.

Globally, there are almost 38 million people living with HIV, most of whom are in low-income countries. When the initial HIV treatment offered to them will not keep their infection in check, an alternate, ‘second-line’, HIV treatment is required. D²EFT is designed to find the best simplified treatment for these people by testing a novel combination of antiretroviral drugs (dolutegravir and ritonavir boosted darunavir).

The benefits of the simplified treatment being tested are multi-faceted: the medication itself would be

formulated as a single pill with fewer side effects, and the need for specialised tests for HIV gene drug resistance would be avoided, simplifying health care supply chains whilst also reducing the cost of the medication. It would also allow nurses and assistants to prescribe second-line treatment (as they do initial treatment), which would further enhance accessibility to medications, especially in resource-limited settings.

Kirby Institute's Associate Professor Mark Polizzotto is leading the project, along with Dr Emmanuelle Papot, Ms Simone Jacoby and Ms Cate Carey, while Professor Mohamed Cissé, Director of Donka National Hospital's HIV program is providing local leadership. Together, they are coordinating the Guinean arm of D²EFT whilst helping to build the capacity of Guinea's clinical research workforce to conduct these types of trials in the future.

“With the support of national and international agencies, this very dedicated Guinean team has overcome many challenges to build an amazing comprehensive and accessible organisation for the management of HIV-infected patients,” said Dr Papot, who has had a long connection with Guinea and co-led the expansion of D²EFT into the country.

Associate Professor Polizzotto agreed, and said, “The involvement of Guinea, and the many other countries in this trial, enables us to test this treatment and the way it is administered in a range of settings. Diversity is critical in setting international treatment guidelines, to ensure they save millions of lives.”



HIV DIAGNOSES IN AUSTRALIA DROP TO LOWEST NUMBER IN 18 YEARS

Australia continues to lead the world in HIV prevention and in 2018 recorded the lowest number of HIV diagnoses since 2001, according to the Kirby Institute's National HIV Quarterly Report, a new report which provides a timely quarterly summary of the numbers of newly diagnosed cases of HIV notified to the National HIV Registry.

Last year, there were 835 HIV diagnoses across the country, which represents a decline of 23% over five years. The decline is largely due to reductions in the number of HIV diagnoses that are reported as attributable to sex between men.



FROM CLINIC TO HAUS DUR: RETHINKING HIV TESTING IN PNG

Kirby Institute researchers Associate Professor Angela Kelly-Hanku, who has a joint appointment with the PNG Institute of Medical Research, and Dr Stephen Bell outlined a series of recommendations to roll out a community HIV testing program successfully in PNG. Trained peer outreach workers will be upskilled to conduct HIV counselling and testing among sex workers, men who have sex with men and transgender women in Port Moresby and other regions of PNG. Unique cultural considerations are at the centre of recommendations, considered alongside the logistics of rolling out community-based testing from financial, workforce and resourcing perspectives.

The recommendations provide a blueprint to roll out a program that would drastically improve HIV testing in PNG.



HOW GAY MEN WHO USE DRUGS ARE PROTECTING THEMSELVES FROM HIV

Kirby Institute researchers Dr Mohamed Hammoud and Associate Professor Garrett Prestage have found that over 80% gay and bisexual men who use crystal methamphetamine during condomless anal intercourse (a practice known as chemsex) are using biomedical HIV prevention strategies including PrEP, the HIV prevention drug, and TasP (Treatment as Prevention) when engaging in condomless anal intercourse compared to those who do not use crystal methamphetamine.

Men who did not use crystal methamphetamine were more likely to engage in condomless anal intercourse without the protection of PrEP. This is a massive shift from just a few years ago, when use of crystal methamphetamine in the context of chemsex was considered a high-risk indicator for HIV among gay and bisexual men.



DR BENJAMIN BAVINTON

Dr Benjamin Bavinton was the recipient of the prestigious 2019 Aileen Plant Memorial Prize in Infectious Diseases Epidemiology. The prize is awarded annually for a first author paper by an Australian researcher, published in the previous calendar year in a peer-reviewed medical journal in the area of infectious diseases epidemiology. Dr Bavinton received the award for his paper communicating the results of the internationally recognised Opposites Attract study, which showed that the risk of HIV transmission is effectively zero when the positive partner is on antiretroviral therapy and has a suppressed viral load.

SEXUAL HEALTH AND SEXUALLY TRANSMISSIBLE INFECTIONS

STIs like chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis can cause major health issues, including infertility and adverse pregnancy outcomes, and they pose a public health threat to us all. We search for open, non-discriminatory, and evidence-based strategies to prevent their spread.

This digitally colorised photomicrograph depicts what was viewed while examining this dark field preparation, of a blood sample extracted from a syphilis patient, which included these *Treponema pallidum* bacterial spirochetes. Image: Susan Lindsley/CDC. phil.cdc.gov/Details.aspx?pid=1248



AUSTRALIA'S FIRST SURVEY OF TRANS AND GENDER DIVERSE SEXUAL HEALTH

In close collaboration with community advocates, clinicians, and researchers from across Australia, the Kirby Institute has conducted the first national survey of sexual health among transgender ('trans') and gender diverse people. This is the largest study of trans and gender diverse people to have been conducted to date in Australia.

Sex and romance are crucial aspects of most people's lives, and yet little is known about how these are expressed and experienced by trans and gender diverse people.

"Research with trans and gender diverse populations internationally has highlighted the need for specific attention to the sexual health and wellbeing of these populations," said Mr Teddy Cook who is an Adjunct Lecturer at the Kirby Institute and Manager, Trans & Gender Health Equity for ACON. "This can only be achieved through the meaningful inclusion of our experiences to inform the design of the services we access."

Prior to 2019, there had been limited research examining the sexual health experiences and needs of this highly diverse population.

"We assembled a fantastically diverse group of researchers, community advocates and clinicians to design the largest study of trans and gender diverse people to have been conducted in Australia to date," said Mr Cook. "The Kirby Institute is a world-renowned infectious disease centre that prioritises the health of diverse populations, and was the perfect academic home for this important community research."

The online survey collected data from more than 1,600 participants, who were asked questions about topics related to their sexual health and wellbeing, including dating, sex, sexual health care, sexual violence and coercion, pleasure, relationship satisfaction and marriage.

The findings were launched at the Australasian Sexual Health Conference in Perth in September this year, generating significant media interest, and launching a national discussion about trans health.

This image is from a stock photo library featuring trans and non-binary models that go beyond the clichés. The Gender Spectrum Collection were taken by Zackary Drucker. genderphotos.vice.com



"Providers of sexual health care need to better understand the broad spectrum of gender diversity, and must not make assumptions about their patients' genders, bodies, sexual orientations or sexual partners."

**MR TEDDY COOK
ADJUNCT LECTURER, KIRBY INSTITUTE
AND MANAGER, TRANS & GENDER
HEALTH EQUITY, ACON**

The Kirby Institute's Professor John Kaldor is a senior researcher involved in the Trans and Gender Diverse Health Survey. He said that this research was an important area of expansion for the Kirby Institute. "For too long, the views of trans and gender diverse people have been excluded from major health collection surveys. This report goes some way to the correct the imbalance. There is still a lot more work to do to ensure truly equal access to high-quality health care for this population, and we are committed to continuing this work in collaboration with our close community partners."

This research is funded through the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council.

THE FINDINGS

High rates of sexual assault

More than half of trans and gender diverse people who participated in the survey had ever experienced sexual violence or coercion, a rate that is four times higher than the general Australian population. Further, less than half of people who experienced sexual violence or coercion reported it to someone or otherwise sought help.

Marginalisation accessing sexual health care

Trans and gender diverse people reported experiencing very high rates of marginalisation when accessing care related to sexual health. "Less than half of our participants said they'd experienced inclusive and respectful care for sexual health. Importantly, less positive experiences in care were associated with lower testing rates for sexually transmissible infections amongst sexually active participants," said Mr Cook. "Providers of sexual health care need to better understand the broad spectrum of gender diversity, and must not make assumptions about their patients' genders, bodies, sexual orientations or sexual partners."

HIV and STIs

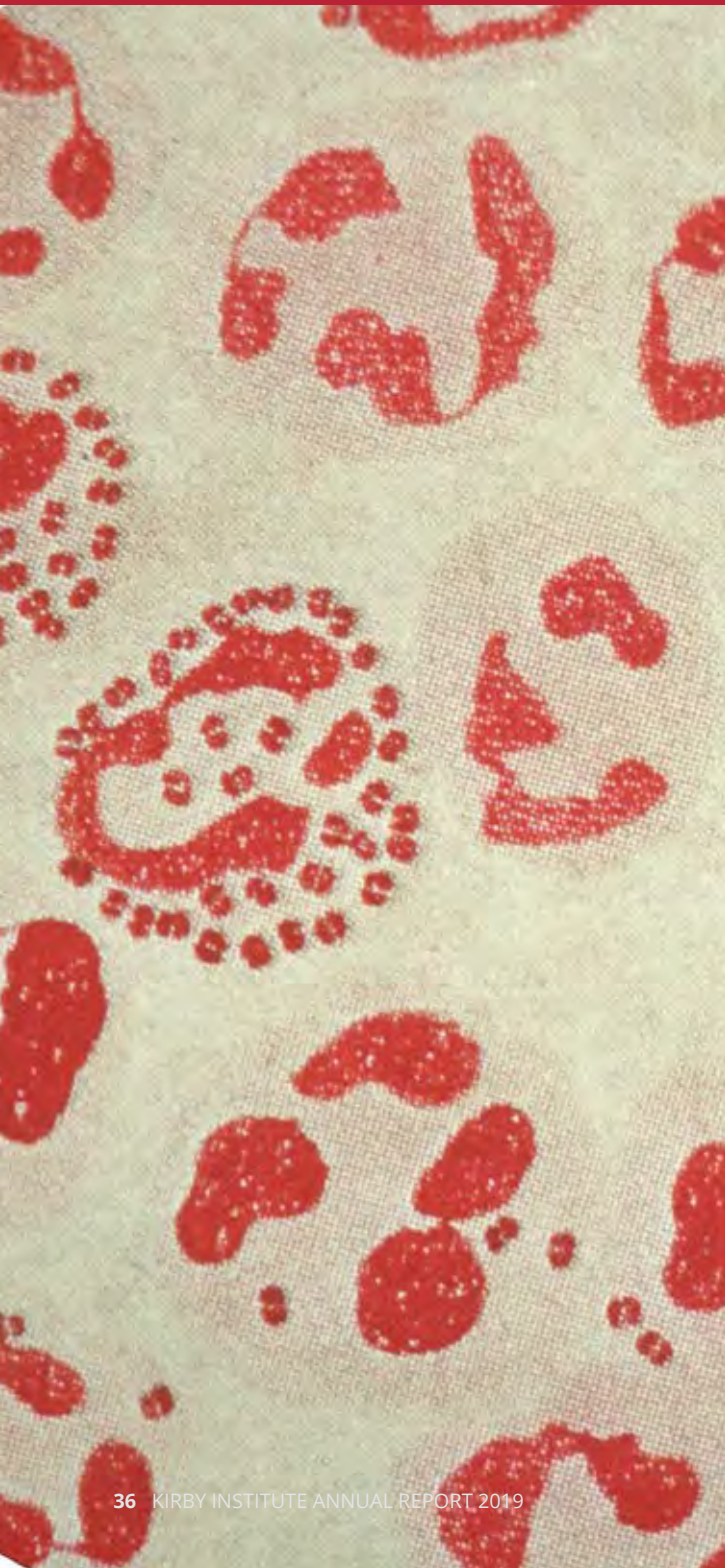
The survey also revealed a number of practices that place trans and gender diverse people at risk for HIV and other sexually transmissible infections. "Only half of our participants reported having a recent sexual health screen and the majority reported inconsistent condom use with casual partners. These factors, along with poor experiences in care related to sexual health, can heighten vulnerability to HIV and other STIs," said Mr Cook.

Resilience

While some of the survey results are deeply concerning, the survey also revealed that many trans and gender diverse people lead happy sexual and romantic lives.

"Trans and gender diverse people engage in a wide range of sexual practices, we get married and divorced, look for sex and love online and offline, and form partnerships with people of all genders. In this way, we are quite like the rest of Australia," says Shoshana Rosenberg, another study investigator who co-presented the findings in Perth. "Australia's sexual health policies, guidelines and services require a lot of work to improve health in this domain. Sexual health is a key factor in our overall health and wellbeing, which is why it is great that, for the first time, we have data to guide this important work."

This illustration depicts a photomicrograph of a Gram stained urethral discharge specimen, which revealed numbers of intracellular, *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* bacteria, in a case of acute gonorrhoeae. Image: CDC. phil.cdc.gov/Details.aspx?pid=2108



GO GO GONORRHOEA!

The Kirby Institute has partnered with Griffith University's Institute for Glycomics to conduct a world-first trial for a promising gonorrhoea vaccine.

The \$2.7 million study will test whether a meningococcal B vaccine protects against gonorrhoea in gay and bisexual men.

"Australia has already seen its first cases of multi-drug resistant gonorrhoea. This vaccine is the best chance we've had to control gonorrhoea," said Professor Basil Donovan, who is head of the Sexual Health Program and is leading the trial at the Kirby Institute along with Professor Andrew Grulich. Professor Donovan says it is essential to bring gonorrhoea under control in the coming years before resistance to antibiotics renders the condition untreatable.

The bacteria that causes gonorrhoea and meningococcal B disease are very similar, and observational data indicates that a meningococcal vaccine may protect against gonorrhoea. The researchers will study whether gay and bisexual men at high risk of contracting gonorrhoea, who receive a meningococcal B vaccine, have fewer new cases of gonorrhoea compared to those who do not receive the vaccine.

Once known as "the clap" gonorrhoea is a sexually transmissible infection caused by the *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* bacteria which can infect the throat, anus, urethra, cervix and eyes – risking pain, infertility, blindness, and spread to internal organs. The inflammation caused by gonorrhoea is known to promote the transmission of HIV.



DR LOUISE CAUSER

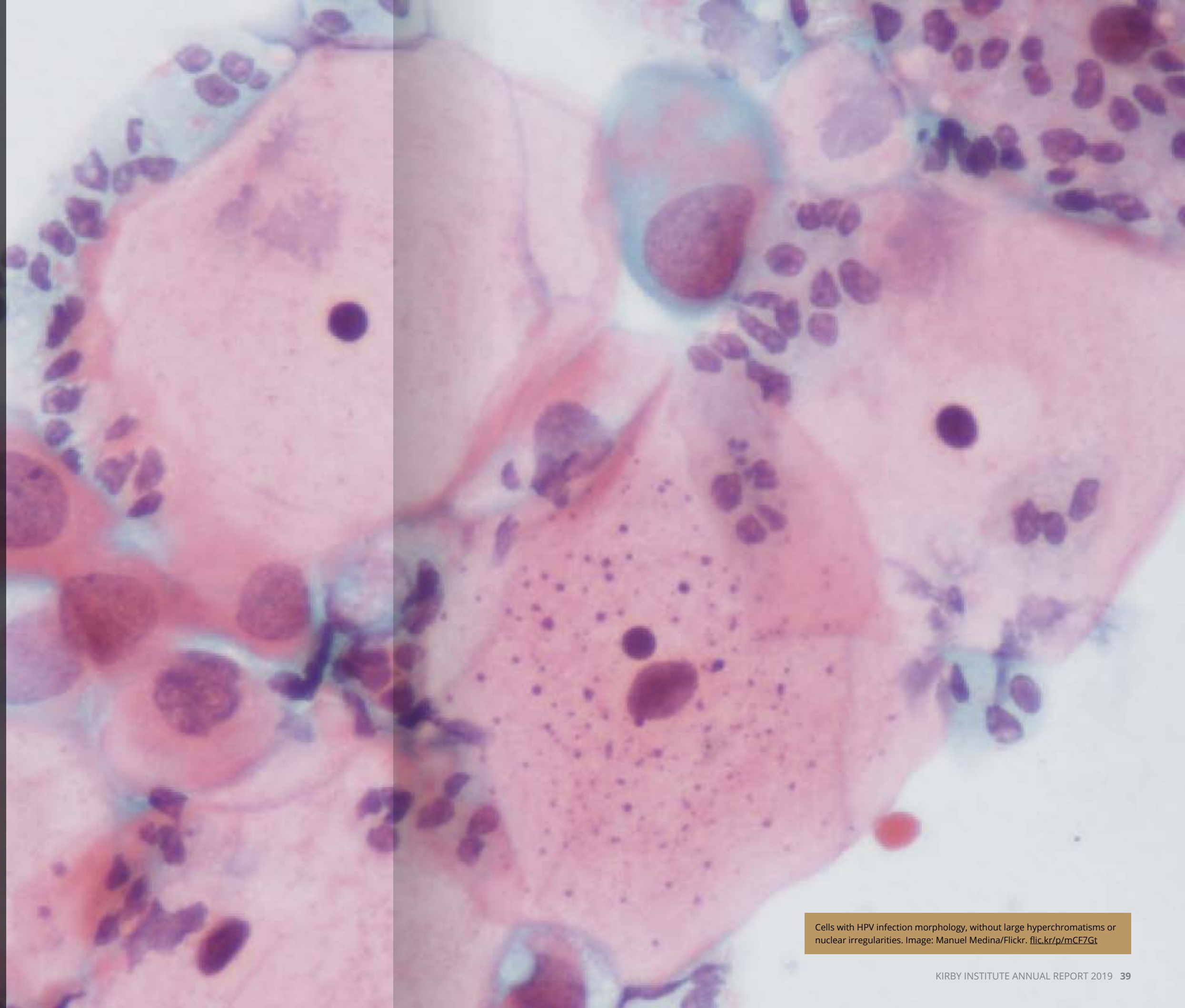
This year, Dr Louise Causer was awarded the Frank Fenner Early Career Fellowship. The award recognises Dr Causer as the highest ranked applicant from the NHMRC Biomedical or Public Health Early Career Fellowship category whose research focus is in an area of international public health application.

Dr Causer's work focuses on evaluations of point-of-care diagnostics for STIs, in particular chlamydia and gonorrhoea. She is a co-investigator on the NHMRC-funded TTANGO (and TTANGO2) "Test, Treat and Go" trial, which is implementing STI point-of-care testing in remote and regional Australia. Point-of-care testing enables people to do a test, receive their results, and if needed, begin treatment, all in the one visit, removing prohibitive barriers such as geographical distance to a health clinic.

"During this fellowship, I'm looking forward to developing a research portfolio that will maximise the benefits of new diagnostic technologies and strategies like rapid point-of-care testing for STIs," said Dr Causer.

HPV

Human papillomavirus, or HPV, is an infection that can lead to cancers including cervical cancer and anal cancer. We work to evaluate and improve vaccination and screening programs designed to eliminate HPV before it progresses into cancer.



Cells with HPV infection morphology, without large hyperchromatisms or nuclear irregularities. Image: Manuel Medina/Flickr. [flic.kr/p/mCF7Gt](https://www.flickr.com/photos/mCF7Gt/)



WHAT IS HPV AND WHY IS AUSTRALIA A WORLD LEADER IN HPV PREVENTION?

There are over 140 types of human papillomavirus (HPV). Some are relatively harmless, whilst others can lead to a range of health issues, including genital warts and cancer.

Australia has long been at the cutting edge of cervical screening and HPV vaccination and has some of the lowest rates of HPV-related illness in the world. For over a decade, Kirby Institute researchers have been involved in monitoring and evaluating Australia's National HPV Vaccination Strategy that is aimed at reducing and eventually eliminating cancer-causing HPV infections, and are applying the lessons learned in Australia to address HPV-associated health issues internationally.

The National HPV Vaccination Program is a centrepiece of Australia's HPV prevention efforts. Introduced in 2007, the highly effective HPV vaccine was first offered to Australian girls aged 12–13 years through state-run school-based vaccination programs, along with a highly successful two-year catch-up program for women aged up to 26 years in the community. In 2013, boys aged 12–13 years were also added to the program. This made Australia the first country in the world to introduce a national HPV vaccination program, as well as gender neutral HPV vaccination.

PROVIDING CRITICAL INSIGHTS TO INFORM AUSTRALIA'S HPV STRATEGY

Research teams from the Kirby Institute have been evaluating the effectiveness of the National HPV Vaccination Program by tracking changes in rates of HPV infection and genital warts, both of which are early indicators of vaccine impact and effectiveness.

Professor Basil Donovan leads the Australian Government's Genital Warts Surveillance Network with the support of Seqirus, and is working on an 11-year follow-up study of the impact of HPV vaccination on genital warts in Australian heterosexuals in collaboration with a national network of sexual health clinics. Further analyses that are underway include the impact of vaccination among gay and bisexual men, and migrants and travellers.

"Australia's HPV Vaccination Program has led to remarkable and globally unprecedented reductions in genital warts for both women and men," said Professor Donovan. "Australia's catch-up program with young women in the community between 2007 and 2009 is predicted to reap benefits for the prevention of cervical

cancer for at least 50 years. It's been so rewarding to see how the national effort has led to the success of Australia's vaccination program. But we need to make sure that these gains are maintained."

Dr Dorothy Machalek, a public health epidemiologist, has been working in the field of cervical cancer and HPV research for 10 years. Having completed her PhD at the Kirby Institute, she worked at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, and returned this year as a Senior Research Fellow. Dr Machalek leads the Commonwealth Department of Health-funded National HPV Monitoring Program (called IMPACT) that is evaluating the long-term impact of HPV vaccination on HPV infections.

"Surveillance aims to track the prevalence of HPV infection, both vaccine types and non-vaccine types in Australia. The purpose is to make sure the National HPV Vaccination Program is doing what it is supposed to do in preventing infection", explained Dr Machalek. "This has been critical to the success of Australia's program, and will ensure that populations at higher risk of HPV-related disease are being protected."

Screening for HPV infection is another critical element to the Australia's HPV prevention strategies. Australia's National Cervical Cancer Screening Program has been operating since 1991, and has been highly successful in reducing the incidence and death from invasive cervical cancer. Until recently, the program involved two-yearly screening starting at the age of 18 years with a 'Pap' test which looked for potentially

cancerous cell changes on the cervix caused by HPV. The program was totally overhauled recently and now is based on a five-yearly test called the Cervical Screening Test, that looks for HPV itself, starting at the age of 25 years. The Cervical Screening Test is more effective than the Pap test at detecting underlying high-grade disease and cancer, because it screens for HPV rather than the resulting changes in the cervical cells down the track.

Dr Machalek has also been involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the new screening program. "The Australian cervical screening program has undergone a major paradigm shift, but early observations show that it is performing as expected," she said. "The community can feel reassured that Australia has a world class cervical cancer screening program that is based on up-to-date scientific evidence and best practice."

Professor Andrew Grulich is leading a team of Kirby Institute researchers who are working to better understand how HPV leads to anal cancer, with the aim of informing guidelines for screening of gay and bisexual men, to detect anal cancer precursors caused by HPV before they become cancerous. Gay and bisexual men are at particular risk of anal cancer – especially individuals living with HIV. Kirby Institute researchers also work with our extensive clinical networks to deliver state-of-the-art training to general practitioners in the latest anal cancer screening techniques.



Professor Andrew Vallely and Dr Steven Badman joined delegates and representatives from PNG, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji and Samoa for a workshop in Suva, Fiji in December 2019 that led to a joint call towards the elimination of cervical cancer in the Pacific.

Expanding HPV elimination efforts into our region

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has among the highest rates of cervical cancer globally, with an estimated 1,500 deaths per year. Like most low- and middle-income countries, PNG was unable to establish Pap test screening on a large scale. The development of new point-of-care testing methods for HPV, based on self-collected vaginal specimens, provides a new model that the Kirby Institute has been evaluating in PNG to detect women at greatest risk of cervical pre-cancer and offer them same-day curative treatment to prevent the development of cancer.

Kirby Institute researchers, led by Professor Andrew Vallely, are working with the PNG Institute of Medical Research to roll out an expanded point-of-care testing program that detects the specific strains of HPV that can develop into cervical cancer.

“Our research on HPV prevention has really started to make a difference for low- and middle-income countries where cervical cancer caused by HPV remains one of the leading causes of fatal cancer,” said Professor John Kaldor, who was an investigator in the earliest epidemiological studies showing that HPV caused cervical cancer, and has maintained a strong involvement in Australia’s surveillance efforts for HPV.

Further afield, Professor Kaldor and Dr Machalek are leading a world-first project that is measuring the impact of one and two-dose HPV vaccine schedules in South Africa, in partnership with the University of the Witwatersrand, with funding from NHMRC and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Using Australia’s highly successful surveillance approach for measuring the prevalence of HPV infection at a population level, the project is evaluating the impact of 2-dose and 1-dose vaccination schedules in South African adolescent girls. Findings will inform the population impact of the HPV vaccine in a country with extreme socioeconomic diversity and high incidence of HIV infection, and will have the potential to greatly accelerate vaccine uptake in the region if single-dose vaccination is proven to be effective.

“No one should be dying from this preventable and treatable viral infection,” said Dr Machalek. “Now that we’ve been running these programs for over a decade in Australia, we have robust evidence demonstrating that they work. We have a real opportunity to share the knowledge and learnings from our approach to HPV prevention and elimination with colleagues around the world, and I’m extremely proud to be a part of this work.”

WORKING TO PREVENT ANAL CANCER

The Kirby Institute is leading the way in HPV-associated anal cancer research, having conducted the SPANC study, led by Professor Andrew Grulich, that investigated the natural history of anal cancer precursors in HIV positive men who have sex with men to aid in the development of screening programs. The SPACE study, which is led by Associate Professor Mark Polizzotto, is evaluating whether pomalidomide is successful in treating anal cancer precursors.

Now, thanks to generous ongoing funding from The Glendonbrook Foundation, the Kirby Institute has been hosting a series of workshops training general practitioners in techniques to improve screening for anal cancer, including a procedure now called Digital Ano-Rectal Examination (DARE) which includes a thorough anal canal examination to detect pre-cancerous lesions.



DR CARMELLA LAW

Dr Carmella Law holds a conjoint appointment with the Kirby Institute and St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney, and is leading the general practitioner training for the early detection of anal cancer precursors.

Dr Law is one of only a handful of clinicians nationwide who are trained in High Resolution Anoscopy (HRA), a procedure which diagnoses early anal cancers; essentially the equivalent of colposcopy but involving the anal canal.

Using her expertise in HRA, she has developed this innovative workshop that provides both theoretical and hands-on training in DARE.



EMERGING INFECTIONS

In order to stay ahead of the next pandemic, we need to be able to predict and plan for future threats and challenges. We do this by analysing and modelling epidemics, and by developing and testing equipment and interventions that prevent the spread of disease.

Colorised scanning electron micrograph of an apoptotic cell (blue) infected with SARS-COV-2 virus particles (red), isolated from a patient sample. Image captured at the NIAID Integrated Research Facility (IRF) in Fort Detrick, Maryland. Image: NIAID. flic.kr/p/2iG1YKp



Above: Associate Professor David Heslop and Professor Raina MacIntyre at UNSW Sydney.
Right: Speakers at the Pacific Eclipse event.

PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

Although unknown to the world, COVID-19 had emerged and was beginning to spread in December 2019. At the same time, the Kirby Institute coordinated a global pandemic exercise in the United States attended by over 200 invited key government and non-government stakeholders across different sectors from the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand the Indo-Pacific region.

Despite being eradicated 40 years ago, smallpox can be synthetically reproduced in a lab with new technology. If it reappeared, would we be equipped to manage it, or would it spell disaster for the global population? This hypothetical scenario unfolded in 'Pacific Eclipse', an immersive tabletop exercise and simulation of a multi-threat bioterrorism disaster. The exercise was held in the US on 9 December, the 40-year anniversary of smallpox eradication. It was designed by the Kirby Institute's Professor Raina MacIntyre, Associate Professor David Heslop from the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at UNSW Sydney, PLuS Alliance partner Associate Professor Brian Gerber from Arizona State University, with assistance from the US Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii.

The exercise took place across three sites in the USA: Washington, Phoenix, and Honolulu. It was an immersive experience designed to allow participants to move through an unfolding bioterrorism scenario, to make decisions using live polling, and consider choices in difficult situations. It covered critical issues that bear particular relevance to COVID-19 (which spreads in a remarkably similar way to smallpox), such as travel bans, infected ships and mass transport vehicles, contact tracing, testing, vaccination, law and order, and critical infrastructure. They also looked at the political impact of the 2020 election in the US on pandemic control.



“In a crisis such as this, it is important to be aware of preparedness within a range of sectors, and to navigate local and global priorities in order to avoid disaster.”

PROFESSOR RAINA MACINTYRE
PROGRAM HEAD, BIOSECURITY PROGRAM, KIRBY INSTITUTE; PROFESSOR OF GLOBAL BIOSECURITY; AND NHMRC PRINCIPAL RESEARCH FELLOW

“This exercise was designed to test the response of local and global systems, at all levels of government and non-government sectors,” explained Professor MacIntyre. “In a crisis such as this, it is important to be aware of preparedness within a range of sectors, and to navigate local and global priorities in order to avoid disaster. We predicted many issues that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, including travel bans, lockdowns, mask shortages, civil unrest, international tensions, protests and cascading failures of response.”

Today, the risk of bioterrorism is increasing due to advances in synthetic biology and genetic engineering. Technological capability for serial attacks and multi-threat environments is also on the rise, with formerly siloed areas of security, such as biosecurity and cybersecurity, converging over time.

Pacific Eclipse was underpinned by mathematical modelling research, to provide realistic epidemic outcomes under different scenarios and resulting allocation. The exercise was attended by representatives across defence, health, law enforcement and other government and non-government agencies including the WHO, US Centers for Disease Control, US military, FBI, London Metropolitan Police, Defence Science Technology Laboratories UK, and several state and international agencies.

Associate Professor Heslop said that this was a terrific opportunity for international security leaders to converge on an issue

of increasing importance. “The fact that this meeting was attended by delegates from a range of sectors and nations, who navigated the exercise simultaneously, meant that we were able to deliver a multi-disciplinary simulation of such an event,” he said. “It provides a good insight into how well our collective systems are prepared, and importantly, where we can do better in working across different sectors such as health, defence and police.”

The exercise was hosted via the PLuS Alliance, a global alliance between three leading universities – Arizona State University, King’s College London, and UNSW Sydney – to solve global challenges around health, social justice, sustainability, technology and innovation. Associate Professor Brian Gerber at Arizona State noted the faculty partnerships created through the PLuS Alliance in part made this exercise possible. “An enormously complex problem like a global disease outbreak requires a coordinated global response. The diversity of disciplinary expertise among PLuS faculty who work together on projects related to global security helps advance thinking about these kinds of issues. This exercise was a good illustration of faculty from the three universities collaborating on an important effort.”

A NOTE FROM PROFESSOR RAINA MACINTYRE:

On October 21st 2020, one of the key speakers at Pacific Eclipse, Dr J Michael Lane, passed away in Atlanta. He had been the director of smallpox eradication at the US Centers for Disease Control, and to have his expertise in the room was a privilege and one which enabled his vast knowledge to be shared with people involved in the COVID-19 response today. Many of those who participated in Pacific Eclipse have commented that it helped inform their response to the current pandemic.



Antibiotic resistance tests: Bacteria are streaked on dishes with white disks, each impregnated with a different antibiotic. Clear rings, such as those on the left, show that bacteria have not grown—indicating that these bacteria are not resistant. The bacteria on the right are fully resistant to all but two of the seven antibiotics tested. By Dr Graham Beards at en.wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0, commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25206097

RESEARCH HUB TO COMBAT ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE

As part of its Industrial Transformation Research Hubs initiative, the Australian Research Council has awarded almost \$5 million to the Research Hub to Combat Antimicrobial Resistance, supplemented with an additional \$3.8 million from biotech company SpeeDx and other partner organisations. Led by Professor Rebecca Guy, the Hub will take on the challenge of antimicrobial resistance for Australia through a world-first partnership between industry, researchers and end users.

Antimicrobial resistance is a growing problem globally. Bacteria, viruses, and some parasites are increasingly becoming resistant to antibiotics, antivirals and antimalarials, posing a serious threat to human health. Antibiotic overuse combined with an inadequate pipeline for diagnostic technologies and new drugs has led to this development.

The Hub will focus on sexually transmitted microorganisms, which is a critical area of concern in Australia and our region, as an example of the wider problem of antimicrobial resistance.

“By nature, antimicrobial resistance is an inherently shifting and multi-faceted 21st century problem, requiring high-level interdisciplinary collaboration,” said Professor Guy. “We are excited to work with colleagues from over 16 organisations to tackle this issue.”

The Hub aims to connect the many complex facets of antimicrobial resistance, to provide a highly integrated diagnostic and pharmaceutical solutions to the problem of antimicrobial resistance under the umbrella of antimicrobial stewardship. By doing so, the Hub will establish Australian industry as global leaders.

“We plan to develop new molecular diagnostic technologies and improve the processes for identifying potential new antibiotics,” Professor Guy said. “By securing connections across disciplines working to tackle antimicrobial resistance solutions, we hope to maximise the value of investment in this area.”

The ARC Industrial Transformation Research Hubs scheme aims to engage Australia’s best researchers on issues facing industrial economies and training the future workforce. The scheme supports collaborative research activity between industry and the Australian higher education sector.



PROFESSOR REBECCA GUY

Professor Rebecca Guy is Head of the Kirby Institute’s Surveillance, Evaluation and Research Program. She is leading the Research Hub to Combat Antimicrobial Resistance, funded by the Australian Research Council.

“By nature, antimicrobial resistance is an inherently shifting and multi-faceted 21st century problem, requiring high-level interdisciplinary collaboration,” said Professor Guy. “We are excited to work with colleagues from so many organisations to tackle this issue.”

OUR INTERNATIONAL REACH

We collaborate with organisations around the globe, creating solutions to global health challenges and driving our collective research success into the future.

The INSIGHT (the International Network of Strategic Initiatives in Global HIV Trials) was established over 20 years ago in response to the HIV pandemic, and has since conducted pivotal trials in HIV and other viral infections including influenza. It was conceived by colleagues at five universities along with the U.S. National Institutes of Health. The Kirby Institute conducts a number of important studies through the INSIGHT network, which brings together study sites in low, middle, and high-income countries, and resources them effectively to find treatments that will save lives.

680
global
collaborations

The Therapeutics Research, Education, and AIDS Training in Asia (TREAT Asia) HIV cohorts consist of adult (TAHOD and TAHOD-LITE) and paediatric (TApHOD) observational cohorts with 21 adult and 19 paediatric participating sites across Asia.

The longitudinal cohorts aim to evaluate the impact of HIV disease, co-infections, and treatment management on clinical outcomes among people living with HIV in the Asia-Pacific. Project management and co-ordination are conducted at the TREAT Asia headquarter in Bangkok, Thailand. The Kirby Institute is proud to aggregate and analyse data for TREAT Asia.

The Kerti Praja Foundation (YKP) in Bali, Indonesia conducts research, provides community outreach and comprehensive health care for local communities in Bali, with a particular focus on female sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender populations and people who inject drugs. The Kirby Institute has longstanding collaborations with YKP, and we are currently partnering on a HIV test implementation research project, and on the SeKSI Study, which provided the first detailed sexual behavioural data from men who have sex with men and transgender people in Bali.

364
collaborations in
Australia

The Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) is an internationally recognised leader in biomedical, social sciences and public health research. The Kirby Institute and PNGIMR have been close research partners for over a decade, particularly in the areas of HIV and sexual and reproductive health.

Our global collaborations by the numbers

Argentina	14	France	7	Mexico	3	South Korea	1
Australia	364	Germany	15	Myanmar	4	Spain	1
Belgium	4	Guinea	1	Netherlands	5	Sri Lanka	1
Brazil	3	India	7	New Zealand	12	Sweden	2
Cambodia	1	Indonesia	32	Nigeria	2	Switzerland	14
Canada	21	Iran	2	Norway	2	Taiwan	1
Chile	1	Israel	2	Philippines	2	Thailand	18
China	8	Italy	1	PNG	22	Timor-Leste	1
Colombia	1	Japan	2	Portugal	2	UK	23
Denmark	4	Kenya	1	Singapore	1	USA	48
Ethiopia	3	Malaysia	7	Solomon Islands	1	Vietnam	3
Fiji	1	Mali	1	South Africa	7	Zimbabwe	1

AUSTRALIAN COLLABORATIONS

We work with a diverse range of partners across Australia, including communities, governments, health care professionals, other research organisations, and industry.

Our national collaborations by the numbers

ACT	23	NT	14
Canberra	23	Darwin	9
		Alice Springs	5
NSW	181	QLD	36
Bourke	1	Brisbane	18
Broken Hill	1	Cairns	8
Bungendore	1	Gold Coast	2
Coffs Harbour	4	Ipswich	1
Dubbo	1	Mackay	1
Forster	1	Mount Isa	1
Gosford	2	Palm Island	1
Goulburn	1	Sunshine Coast	1
Grafton	2	Townsville	3
Griffith	1		
Hunter	1	SA	21
Illawarra/Shoalhaven	1	Adelaide	21
Kempsey	2		
Lightning Ridge	1	TAS	8
Lismore	2	Devonport	1
Lithgow	1	Hobart	6
Narooma	1	Launceston	1
Newcastle	7		
Nowra	1	VIC	57
Orange	2	Bendigo	1
Port Kembla/Nowra	1	Geelong	2
Port Macquarie/Kempsey	1	Melbourne	54
Queanbeyan	1		
Shoalhaven	1	WA	24
Sydney	133	Albany	1
Tamworth	1	Broome	3
Taree	1	Bunbury	1
Tweed Heads	1	Perth	19
Wagga Wagga	3		
Wollongong	4		

To help train the next generation of Aboriginal community outreach workers, the Kirby Institute contributes to the Aboriginal Population Health Traineeship Initiative (APHTI). Facilitated by the Ministry of Health based at Murrumbidgee Local Health District (MLHD) Public Health Unit in Wiradjuri Country, the APHTI is a three-year long training program comprising part-time study towards a Master of Public Health and a series of placements in the public health unit at MLHD.

The NSW HIV Strategy is a forward-thinking, best-practice strategy that has been developed and implemented through a close partnership between the Kirby Institute, NSW Health, and ACON, an LGBTQI+ health promotion organisation. This important collaboration between government, community and the research field was featured in a UNAIDS report titled "Communities at the Centre", and demonstrates how effective cross-sector partnerships can successfully address pressing health challenges.

The Australian Hepatitis C Elimination Program is part of a partnership detailed in a memorandum of understanding between the Kirby Institute and Burnet Institute and aims to eliminate the burden of hepatitis C in Australia by 2026. This year, the two institutes published the first national report on progress towards the elimination of hepatitis C virus in Australia that showed that Australia has made great strides towards hepatitis C elimination, but many are still missing out.

A group of people, including men, women, and children, are sitting on a porch in Fiji. They are engaged in a community meeting or interview. The porch is covered with a blue and yellow patterned cloth. The background shows lush greenery and a building with windows. The people are dressed in casual, colorful clothing. The scene is set outdoors, with a wooden railing and a thatched roof visible. The overall atmosphere is one of a community gathering.

GLOBAL HEALTH

Our health solutions target global problems and have global impact. We use best practice research methods, adapted to meet urgent health needs in our region.

Qualitative interviews being conducted with community members in Fiji to explore experiences and perceptions of scabies and impetigo, and community attitudes towards mass drug administration.



TACKLING NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES IN OUR REGION

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are communicable diseases that are prevalent in 149 tropical and subtropical countries, affecting more than one billion people and costing developing economies billions of dollars every year. At particular risk are remote and rural communities, with inadequate sanitation, limited access to health services and living in close contact with domestic animals and livestock, so preventative measures and treatment delivery need to be tailored to their specific circumstances.

There are 20 diseases that the World Health Organization has designated as NTDs, and the Kirby Institute has an expanding program of research into some of these diseases, to meet the urgent health needs within our region. Our NTD research group is conducting research on intestinal worms, trachoma, lymphatic filariasis and scabies in several locations in our region, including Australia, Fiji, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

Intestinal worm control in Vietnam

Soil-transmitted helminths, more commonly known as 'intestinal worms', are the most prevalent NTD globally. They are transmitted by worm eggs and larvae present in human faeces, which can contaminate soil in areas where sanitation is poor. People with long-term worm infestation have a higher risk of a range of health problems, including anaemia, malnutrition, and poor growth.

In endemic areas, control of worm infections is undertaken predominantly through regular treatment programs, usually targeted at school-aged children. These programs are usually implemented through schools, with the medications being dispensed by teachers.

Associate Professor Susanna Vaz Nery and Dr Clare Dyer are collaborating with a large international team, including the Vietnam Ministry of Health, in leading a large trial in Vietnam, the first of its kind in the region, in an effort to improve control of intestinal worms. The study is aiming to determine whether scaled-up community-wide treatment is better than targeted school-based treatment.



Top left: Teacher explains intestinal worms treatment to children at school in Vietnam. **Bottom left:** Associate Professor Susana Vaz Nery with research team members and local collaborators during an engagement visit for the CoDe-STH study in Vietnam. **Above:** Dr Lucia Romani with community engagement team in Solomon Islands.

Through their study, over 120,000 doses of anti-worm drugs will be delivered at schools and communities in Dak Lak Province.

Associate Professor Vaz Nery said currently, there is a lack of evidence from field-based research to support community-wide treatment programs. This study will contribute to filling this evidence gap and either confirm or refute the predictions from mathematical models about the effectiveness of a community-based approach. "We have a real opportunity to inform global policy and improve control of intestinal worm infections, to maximise the benefits for the communities where these infections are endemic," she said.

The research is a collaboration with the Tay Nguyen University (Vietnam), the Ministries of Health and Education in Vietnam, as well as the Erasmus MC Rotterdam (Netherlands), the Imperial College (United Kingdom), the University of Melbourne, Curtin University and the Australian National University.

Mass drug administration in the Pacific to control scabies and impetigo

Scabies, caused by tiny mites, is a debilitating skin condition leading to severe itching. If untreated it can lead to serious bacterial infections, not only of the skin but also of internal organ systems including the kidney and heart. It affects an estimated 200 million people worldwide.

Alongside other researchers and the Fiji Ministry of Health, the Kirby Institute co-led a world-first trial of mass drug administration in Fiji, which found that one round of ivermectin, an oral antiparasitic treatment, reduced the prevalence of scabies by 94 per cent one year after the intervention. The success of the trial in Fiji led to it being extended to the Solomon Islands, where ivermectin was offered together with azithromycin (an antibiotic used to control the blinding disease trachoma) to reduce the prevalence of both scabies and associated skin infection. Mass drug administration involves offering the medication, which has few side effects, to the entire population, regardless of whether or not they had the infection, to interrupt transmission.

"Mass drug administration has been used to successfully control other important parasitic and bacterial diseases around the world – we have shown it can be used for scabies too, and that its effect is long-lasting," said Dr Lucia Romani, the Kirby Institute lead on these projects.

The Solomon Islands arm of the trial was, at the time, the largest ever mass treatment conducted for the control of scabies and saw a reduction of almost 90 per cent in cases a year after treatment. Cases of impetigo decreased by 74 per cent.

The research is a collaboration between the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), the Kirby Institute, the Solomon Islands Ministry of Health and Medical Services, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

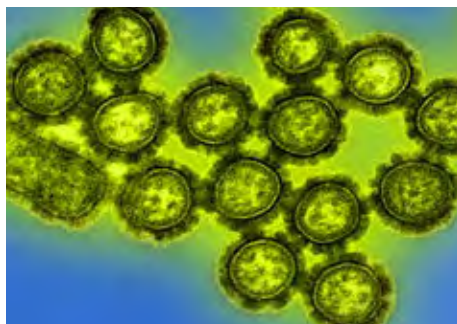


COLLABORATION TO ELIMINATE SCABIES

\$10 million has been awarded to a collaboration aimed at eliminating scabies through an initiative to be known as the World Scabies Program.

Dr Lucia Romani and Professor John Kaldor are in the leadership group of this collaboration. They have been working with ministries of health in Fiji and the Solomon Islands over more than a decade on projects to eliminate scabies. The projects have adopted the disease control strategy of mass drug administration, which involves treating an entire population for scabies at the same time, regardless of whether or not individuals have the infection. The studies showed that by treating the entire population, scabies infection reduced by up to 90%, providing the evidence base for future elimination projects.

The funds come from the Macquarie Group's 50th anniversary philanthropic commitment to address social need.



UNCOVERING GAPS IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF INFLUENZA THERAPIES

A major international clinical trial conducted by researchers at the Kirby Institute at UNSW Sydney in collaboration with global partners in the INSIGHT network discovered that a treatment that was long assumed to improve the health of people with severe influenza infections, in fact, provides no clear clinical benefit. The results of the trial were published in *The Lancet Respiratory* and revealed crucial gaps in our understanding of immunotherapies to treat influenza.

"For one hundred years, the theory that immunoglobulin therapy was effective in treating influenza had not been properly tested. Now this rigorous randomised trial has shown it does not improve outcomes for people with the most common form of influenza," said Associate Professor Mark Polizzotto, Head of the Therapeutic and Vaccine Research Program at the Kirby Institute was the lead Australian author on the paper.



COLLABORATING FOR A NEW MALARIA TREATMENT

The Kirby Institute's Infection Analytics Program continues to uncover new information to inform the global response to malaria. In 2019, the team published a paper in *PLoS Pathogens* which found that even when a host is immune to malaria (because of a previous infection), parasites which reside inside red blood cells most of the time, are able essentially 'hide' and avoid being eliminated by the host. The immune responses seem to be able to attack the parasite only for the short time that it is 'outside' the red blood cell.

In 2019, the team also forged a new industry partnership through Medicines for Malaria Venture (MMV). MMV, a leading product development partnership, is playing a central role in the international effort to develop new antimalarial drugs. The Kirby Institute is working closely with MMV and their industry partners to design and analyse experimental data on the effectiveness of new antimalarial drugs, with the aim to better inform and accelerate the selection of promising candidate drugs for further development.



DR LUCIA ROMANI

Dr Lucia Romani was named as a finalist for the Griffith University Discovery Award, by Research Australia, Australia's peak advocacy body for health and medical research. The Award honours early career researchers whose work has demonstrated its importance or impact on health outcomes. Dr Romani received the honour for her work leading the world's first comparative trial to show mass drug administration of ivermectin for scabies control produced far superior results than topical medication, with vast long-term improvements for residents in Fiji where scabies is a major health issue.



MAXIMISING IMPACT: HEALTH ECONOMICS AND HEALTH SYSTEMS RESEARCH

Much of the Kirby Institute's research is concerned with the best way to deliver a specific infectious disease treatment or preventative program to a range of populations and communities. But an expanding area of Kirby work is asking the pertinent question: how can we best allocate resources to ensure value for money from spending on infectious diseases?

Professor Virginia Wiseman leads health economics and health systems research at the Kirby Institute and runs UNSW's Health Economics Research Network, a growing program of health economics based at the university.

"The bottom line is that health resources are limited. There are not, and never will be, enough resources to satisfy all needs completely and trade-offs have to be made in regard to where to invest and where not to," she said. "Now, more than ever, the increasing pressure on scarce resources means that all investments in health will come under closer scrutiny."

Economic thinking also fuels health sector reform in many of the low- and middle-income countries where the Kirby Institute works.

"We have just received funding to conduct a trial and economic evaluation of a continuous quality improvement intervention to support HIV and syphilis testing in pregnancy in Indonesia, a country with high rates of antenatal care, but extremely low rates of antenatal screening and treatment for HIV and syphilis," said Professor Wiseman. Indonesia is committed to eliminating mother-to-child-transmission of HIV and syphilis but needs evidence of cost-effective and affordable solutions to meet this goal.



Professor Virginia Wiseman and the PINTAR team in Indonesia.

But health economists are not solely preoccupied with issues of efficiency. With collaborators from the University of Indonesia and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, our health economists are using quantitative approaches such as financing and benefit incidence analysis to evaluate how equitable health financing systems in the Asia-Pacific are. This feeds into national and global monitoring of progress towards Universal Health Coverage. Professor Wiseman and her team are also exploring how to address major public health challenges such as Antimicrobial Resistance by engaging with the private sector. Her study evaluating cost-effective interventions to improve antibiotic dispensing by private drug sellers in Indonesia (the PINTAR study) is a good example of this.

"As the global population grows, and resources become more and more limited, the need for health economics and health systems research will only increase. But there is reason to be optimistic," said Professor Wiseman.

"Thanks to schemes such as UNSW's Scientia program, we have six PhD students in health economics and modelling who will help to build capacity in Australia, Indonesia, China, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea."

"We have to get the best out of health care spending. If health economics had a mantra, that would probably be it. Now more than ever we must do our best to fulfil this duty."

"The bottom line is that health resources are limited. There are not, and never will be, enough resources to satisfy all needs completely and trade-offs have to be made in regard to where to invest and where not to."

**PROFESSOR VIRGINIA WISEMAN
PROFESSOR, SURVEILLANCE
EVALUATION AND RESEARCH
PROGRAM, KIRBY INSTITUTE**

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH

Some of our most important work starts at home. We work in close collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services on solutions for key health issues.

Image contains artwork commissioned by the Kirby Institute that reflects the culture and representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sexual health issues, by proud Kamilaroi and Jerrinja woman, Jasmine Sarin.

Many infectious diseases impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians, particularly in rural and remote communities, where people experience systemic, structural challenges accessing services. Across the full spectrum of research disciplines at the Kirby Institute, our researchers work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health organisations and government agencies that service Aboriginal communities to identify, develop and evaluate culturally appropriate interventions to prevent and treat infectious disease.



The photo above is of Griffith Aboriginal Medical Service, an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service located on Jondaryan Avenue in Griffith, New South Wales.

TALKING ABOUT SEXUAL HEALTH

Sexual health can be difficult to talk about and prioritise for anyone. But for many young Aboriginal people there are additional barriers of stigma, shame and inadequate access to and inappropriate design of health services which can make it even more complex to get the right care.

In recognition of local community skills, knowledge and expertise, Kirby Institute researchers are working with Aboriginal young people to enhance the design of sexual health services and programs.

“Aboriginal youth are the experts on their own lives and experiences,” says Dr Stephen Bell, who is coordinating the project at the Kirby Institute. “Our research approach uses group activities, interviews and research translation workshops to engage young people as leaders in the design of better sexual health support centred around their lived experiences and standpoints.”

Throughout the entire research journey Aboriginal young people are at the centre of process. They identify what is working and what isn't, and highlight aspects of services and outreach programs that can be adapted to enhance their use of these services.

The project, called Talking Story, has been underway since 2018, and this year, Kirby Institute researchers have been working with young people in the field to better understand their experiences with sexual health.



Bobby Whybrow (right) and Kate Whitford (left) have spent time on Wiradjuri Country working with local Aboriginal young people and sexual health services as part of the Talking Story project. The qualitative phase of the project, which involves in-depth conversations with the young people about their experiences and insights, will be completed in 2021.

Dr Bell says that this qualitative approach is crucial to ensuring that young people themselves are at the centre of developing programs and services that meet their needs and improve health. “Qualitative research with Aboriginal young people is based on having in-depth conversations to understand young people’s own perspectives on their lives and experiences, and what can best improve the support they receive for sexual health issues,” said Dr Bell.

As well as understanding the experiences of young people, the project is also facilitating extensive training of Aboriginal health service providers and outreach officers to engage with their communities and peers on this important aspect of health.

Mr Bobby Whybrow, a Wiradjuri man who works at the Murrumbidgee Local Health District, took part in an ‘Introduction to Qualitative Methods’ course at the Kirby Institute in February 2019, and has since been undertaking research with Aboriginal young people across Wiradjuri Country to explore their understandings and experiences of sexual health. Building on his 15 years’ experience working in Aboriginal health, justice, education and arts in NSW and Victoria with a heavy focus on sexual health, harm reduction and public health practice, Mr Whybrow says that this project has been an opportunity to hone his skills and interests working with Aboriginal young people.

“The training at the Kirby Institute was a great opportunity to work with the Kirby’s qualitative researchers, as well as connect with other Aboriginal health and peer workers across the country,” he said.

Importantly, Mr Whybrow said the project has also helped build bridges between Aboriginal young people, researchers and service providers.

“For many Aboriginal young people, especially in rural and remote communities, it can be challenging to discuss sexual health, let alone visit a sexual health clinic. But I think it helps when they’re able to speak to someone they can identify with. Through our conversations, we’ve been able to identify some strategies that could work for regional young Aboriginal people to seek the services available to them if they experience symptoms, or if they have any questions or concerns about sexual health in its broadest sense, to enhance their wellbeing.”

WORKING WITH LGBTQ YOUTH

Kirby Institute researchers are undertaking a new project to identify the needs of young sexually and gender diverse Aboriginal people aged 16–24 years around sexual health services and promotion in metropolitan and regional Australia.

Through confidential conversations, the researchers will identify how services might better meet the needs of Aboriginal LGBTQ young people, regardless of whether or not they are currently having sex, to ultimately support happier relationships and sexual experiences.

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Professor Andrew Grulich (top left), Professor Jason Grebely (top right) and Associate Professor Garrett Prestage (bottom) were recognised as Australia's leaders in their research fields – Sex & Sexuality, Gastroenterology & Hepatology, and AIDS & HIV respectively – by *The Australian's* 2019 special report on Research.

The report analyses papers published in the top 20 journals in more than 250 fields of research across the past five years and identifies the authors (and institutions) that have the most citations of their papers in these journals.



Patrick Castillo Eustaquio, one of the CHART participants from the Philippines, has continued to progress his research career with some remarkable achievements. His oral poster, “Key population-led, community-based test-and-treat approach to address the gaps in the HIV care cascade among men who have sex with men and transgender-women in the Philippines: A retrospective cohort analysis”, was accepted into the AIDS2020 Virtual Conference which took place in July 2020. He was also offered Master of Public Health admission at two UK universities, with recommendations from Kirby Institute researchers he met through CHART. “This program has really changed my life,” he said. Patrick will be enrolling at Imperial College, London in 2020.



One of the Kirby Institute researchers involved in the program as both a lecturer and mentor is Dr Stefanie Vaccher, who recently completed her PhD on adherence to HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a highly effective HIV prevention strategy. “This was the first stats lecture I have given since my PhD was accepted earlier this year, and it was a fantastic experience for me personally being able to share some of the knowledge that I have been fortunate to acquire, and put into play, through completing my thesis,” said Dr Vaccher. “I’m so proud to be involved in this program, and grateful for the opportunity to work with such an impressive group of people from our wider region.”

DAVID COOPER HIV/AIDS RESEARCH TRAINING PROGRAM

An innovative new training program run by the Kirby Institute will enhance HIV research capacity in the Asia Pacific region.

In March this year, the Kirby Institute launched a new research capacity building initiative – called the Cooper HIV/AIDS Research Training (CHART) Program.

With the support of an unconditional grant from ViiV Healthcare, the Kirby Institute has developed a hands-on program that will develop the skills of HIV researchers in the Asia-Pacific region.

The CHART Program was a vision of the Institute’s late director, Professor David Cooper, who passed away in March 2018, to build on 10 years’ experience of the Kirby Institute’s research training programs in countries of the Asia-Pacific region. “David was passionate about capacity building initiatives in our region; not only to upskill researchers, but to ensure they are able to translate their newly acquired skills into active contributions to research and policy development in their own countries,” says Associate Professor Kathy Petoumenos, who is the course director for the CHART Program.

Across two weeks in August, we were delighted to host the first eight participants of the program. The participants travelled from Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines and South Korea and were selected in a competitive application process. Using the skills learnt through the twelve-month program, they will be equipped prepare research reports for national policy makers, as well as manuscripts for publication in peer-reviewed medical journals.

“This is an excellent opportunity for Kirby Institute researchers to share their expertise and experience with colleagues from across the Asia-Pacific region. Participants will leave with new skills and knowledge that will drive HIV research and policy in their home countries,” said Professor Anthony Kelleher, Director of the Kirby Institute. “This program exemplifies a core Kirby Institute value:

to share knowledge and build capacity with the aim of allowing communities to develop their own solutions to infectious disease challenges.”

Professor John Kaldor, head of the Public Health Interventions Research Program at the Kirby Institute says that it is important to engage and collaborate with other countries in our region, especially those where HIV is still epidemic, and that building the capacity of the local workforce is critical.

“Each country has its own unique set of challenges when it comes to tackling HIV, and no one is more aware of these than the people on the ground,” he said. “I don’t think it’s our role to tell other countries what will work for them, but rather to share our knowledge and experiences about how to do the most relevant research, so that they are equipped and empowered with tools to implement change in their own way. Having met this first round of participants, I’m excited to see how they will shape healthier futures for their communities.”

The CHART Program is supported by an unconditional education grant from ViiV Healthcare. The Kirby Institute is a global partner of the Structured Operational Research Training Initiative (SORT IT), coordinated by TDR, the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, hosted at the World Health Organization.



“This is an excellent opportunity for Kirby Institute researchers to share their expertise and experience with colleagues from across the Asia-Pacific region. Participants will leave with new skills and knowledge that will drive HIV research and policy in their home countries.”

**PROFESSOR ANTHONY KELLEHER
DIRECTOR, KIRBY INSTITUTE**



2019 EXTERNAL FUNDING

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)

Program grants	AUD\$
Addressing the major challenges in HIV vaccine and cure research	1,246,008
Discovery and translation of interventions to control sexually transmitted infections and their consequences	1,338,372
Improving the health of people with problematic drug use: hepatitis C and drug dependence	844,554
Pathological and therapeutic antibody production	53,228
Development grants	
Development and validation of a latent tuberculosis diagnostic	128,596
Project grants	
Aboriginal and non-aboriginal women perpetrators of violence: a trial of a prison-based intervention (Beyond Violence)	99,412
A randomised controlled trial of azithromycin versus doxycycline for the treatment of rectal chlamydia infection in men who have sex with men	29,877
A randomised trial to compare dolutegravir+darunavir/r versus recommended standard of care antiretroviral regimens in patients with HIV infection who have failed recommended first line therapy	554,740
Developing youth-centred health promotion strategies to prevent and mitigate the adverse health impacts of adolescent pregnancy in PNG	249,114
Modelling the impact of strategies to control gonorrhoea and minimise the threat of antimicrobial resistance in remote indigenous and other high risk populations	123,098
New strategies to increase testing and treatment for endemic sexually transmitted infections in remote Aboriginal communities	18,130
Point-of-care HPV DNA testing for cervical cancer screening in high-burden, low-resource settings	44,906
Resolving human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) transmission	219,277
Risk factors for long-term chronic disease events in HIV-positive persons: the D:A:D cohort study	214,015
Risk of hepatitis C reinfection among people with current injecting drug use following successful HCV treatment (SHARP-P and SHARP-C)	454,424
SCALE-C: Strategies for hepatitis C testing and treatment in Aboriginal communities that lead to elimination	506,749
School versus community-based albendazole deworming for control of soil transmitted helminths in school-age children in the Philippines	523,163
Solving delivery of gene therapy for control of human immunodeficiency virus infection	255,839
TB control in an endemic setting: socio-cultural knowledge to design context-specific public health promotion, solutions and actions in PNG	538,627
The sexual health and attitudes of Australian prisoners	476,928

	AUD\$
The third Australian study of health and relationships (ASHR3): a nationally representative sexual health survey	186,899
Use of molecular resistance assays to provide alternative oral treatment strategies for gonorrhoea in Indigenous and other high-risk populations; a randomised cluster trial	52,933
Partnership grants	
Developing and implementing systems to optimise treatment, care and support among people diagnosed with HIV	318,699
Enhancing treatment of hepatitis C in opioid substitution settings II (ETHOS II)	124,378
Identifying and addressing gaps in Australia's adolescent HPV vaccination program	82,772
Implementation of an integrated model of chlamydia case management in general practice	5,000
Protecting the blood supply against infectious disease by strengthening the evidence base that guides donor selection and screening policy	362,520
Surveillance and treatment of prisoners with hepatitis C (SToP-C)	198,110
The HIV prevention revolution: measuring outcomes and maximising effectiveness	171,002
Uptake, sustainability and impact of scaling up point-of-care testing for sexually transmissible infections in remote and regional Aboriginal communities (TTANGO 2)	66,390
Centres of Clinical Research Excellence	
Centre for Research Excellence in Cervical Cancer Control (C4)	22,440
Integrated Systems for Epidemic Response (ISER)	384,049
The Australian Centre for the Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases	463,655
European Union Collaborative Research Grants	
European AIDS vaccine initiative 2020	50,000
Fellowships	
Dr Benjamin Bavinton (Early Career Fellowship)	82,950
Dr David Boettiger (Early Career Fellowship)	127,950
Prof Tony Butler (Principal Research Fellowship)	174,433
Dr Louise Causer (Early Career Fellowship)	90,450
Prof Miles Davenport (Senior Research Fellowship)	145,607
Prof Basil Donovan (Practitioner Fellowship)	118,810
Scientia Prof Gregory Dore (Practitioner Fellowship)	118,810
Prof Jason Grebely (Career Development Fellowship)	122,663
Prof Andrew Grulich (Principal Research Fellowship)	159,433
Prof Rebecca Guy (Senior Research Fellowship)	160,607
Dr Bridget Haire (Early Career Fellowship)	82,950

	AUD\$
Dr Behzad Hajarizadeh (Early Career Fellowship)	82,950
Scientia Prof John Kaldor (Senior Principal Research Fellowship)	180,319
Dr David Khoury (Early Career Fellowship)	82,950
Prof Matthew Law (Principal Research Fellowship)	159,433
Prof Andrew Lloyd (Practitioner Fellowship)	128,565
Prof Raina MacIntyre (Principal Research Fellowship)	159,433
Prof Lisa Maher (Senior Research Fellowship)	131,783
Dr Marianne Martinello (Early Career Fellowship)	48,975
A/Prof Gail Matthews (Career Development Fellowship)	122,664
Dr Nicholas Medland (Early Career Fellowship)	90,450
A/Prof Mark Polizzotto (Early Career Fellowship)	90,450
Dr Lucia Romani (Early Career Fellowship)	82,950
Prof Andrew Vallely (Career Development Fellowship)	122,663
Dr Lisa Vallely (Early Career Fellowship)	82,950
A/Prof Vanessa Venturi (Career Development Fellowship)	122,662
Prof Virginia Wiseman (Career Development Fellowship)	122,663
Dr. Huachan Zou (Early Career Fellowship)	27,650
Postgraduate Scholarships	
Dillon Adam	29,849
Nila Dharan	43,341
Discovery projects	
An interdisciplinary approach to host-pathogen interactions in infection	156,578
Understanding global biomedical technologies in local realities	144,932
Federal Department of Health	
Australian collaboration for co-ordinated enhanced sentinel surveillance (ACCESS)	537,507
Enhanced response to addressing sexually transmissible infections (and blood borne viruses) in Indigenous populations	60,066
Extended genital warts surveillance network	122,000
Modelling of optimal use of the national medical stockpile in the event of an attack with anthrax	136,364
National hepatitis C data collection project - REACH-C	219,690

**Australian
Research Council
(ARC)**

**Australian
Governments**

	AUD\$
Research activities for blood borne virus and sexually transmissible infections	483,000
Services to operate the National Trachoma Surveillance and Reporting Unit 2018–2021	300,000
Surveillance activities	1,072,728
NSW Ministry of Health	
Enhancing treatment of hepatitis C in opioid substitution settings II (ETHOS II)	150,000
EPIC-NSW: extended PrEP implementation in communities in NSW	89,160
Identifying and addressing gaps in Australia's adolescent HPV vaccination program	30,000
The HIV prevention revolution: measuring outcomes and maximising effectiveness	288,000
The NSW prevention research support	499,800
The NSW research program for HIV, STIs and viral hepatitis	187,500
Other Government Departments	
ACT arm of EPIC-NSW (ACT Health)	7,848
Developing and implementing systems to optimise treatment, care and support among people diagnosed with HIV (ACT Health Directorate)	3,225
Developing and implementing systems to optimise treatment, care and support among people diagnosed with HIV (Department of Health, Northern Territory)	9,635
Developing and implementing systems to optimise treatment, care and support among people diagnosed with HIV (Department for Health and Wellbeing, SA Health)	14,877
Developing and implementing systems to optimise treatment, care and support among people diagnosed with HIV (Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania)	1,629
Developing and implementing systems to optimise treatment, care and support among people diagnosed with HIV (Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria)	188,111
Developing and implementing systems to optimise treatment, care and support among people diagnosed with HIV (Department of Health, Western Australia)	19,171
Engagement of professional services to assist with the development and delivery of a Mental Health Deconfliction Minimal Viable Product ("MVP") using artificial intelligence principles	54,716
Evaluation of the electronic monitoring of domestic violence offenders program (NSW Department of Justice)	49,994
"Filling in the gaps" – using a big data approach and text mining to enrich COPS data to inform prevention strategies in domestic and family violence (Australian Institute of Criminology)	15,958
Future Research Leadership Fellowship – Associate Professor Mark Polizzotto (Cancer Institute NSW)	120,000
HIV (PrEP) Implementation (WA Health)	80,143
Identifying and addressing gaps in Australia's adolescent HPV vaccination program (WA Health)	25,000

	AUD\$
Improving the dispensing of antibiotics by private drug sellers in Indonesia (DFAT)	525,000
National HIV seroconversion study (QLD Health)	9,389
Reducing impulsivity in repeat violent offenders using a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (NSW Department of Justice)	2,790,000
Reporting framework and surveillance report for stis and BBVs in the ACT (ACT Health)	65,997
National Institutes of Health, USA	
A randomised study of interferon-free treatment for recently acquired hepatitis C in people who inject drugs and people with HIV coinfection (REACT)	1,519,176
Anti-influenza hyperimmune intravenous immunoglobulin (FLU-IVIG) international	102,240
Asia-Pacific HIV research collaboration: cancer studies (subcontract with American Foundation for AIDS Research)	115,943
Ecology of African highland malaria (subcontract with University of California)	74,063
INSIGHT – FLU 002 & FLU 003 (subcontract with University of Minnesota)	638,481
Mechanisms limiting neonatal immunity (subcontract with Cornell University)	65,765
START study (subcontract with University of Minnesota)	571,717
TREAT Asia HIV Observational Database (subcontract with American Foundation for AIDS Research)	348,494
TREAT Asia pediatric HIV observational database (TApHOD) (subcontract with American Foundation for AIDS Research)	291,127
Immunological strategies to modulate SIV rebound following ART interruption	143,319
Other grants and contracts	
Australian	
The impact of improving hepatitis C treatment on hepatocellular carcinoma (Cancer Council NSW)	145,812
International	
CanHepC trainee competition (Canadian Network on Hepatitis C)	84,939
Conduct scoping literature reviews on HTLV-1 infection, covering the areas of epidemiology, health impact and clinical and public health responses	95,662
Comparing qPCR and microscopy for the diagnosis of soil-transmitted helminth infections in the context of a large-scale deworming trial (Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene)	8,912
D ² EFT study (UNITAID)	3,942,510
Making health financing work for the poor: an evaluation of equity in health systems financing in Indonesia (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)	126,877
Modelling analysis on the potential impact of PrEP in Indonesia (World Health Organization)	16,075
Point-of-care testing and treatment of sexually transmitted infections to improve pregnancy outcomes in resource-limited, high-burden settings (PNG Institute of Medical Research)	297,800
To conduct a systematic review of current literature to estimate the frequency of HCV infection among HIV-positive and HIV-negative men who have sex with men (MSM) globally	21,826

Pharmaceutical industry	AUD\$
AbbVie Pty Ltd	1,430,294
Celgene International II Srl	813,400
Gilead Science Inc (USA)	73,991
Gilead Science Pty Ltd	262,084
Janssen-Cilag Pty Ltd	-
Leidos Biomedical Research, Inc.	486,439
Merck Sharp & Dohme	175,021
Sanofi Pasteur	87,216
Seqirus Australia Pty Ltd	162,763
ViiV Healthcare UK Ltd	1,016,059
TOTAL	35,281,285
DONATIONS	549,284

It is through the valued support of our funders that the Kirby Institute is able to conduct the leading-edge research that is improving health outcomes in Australia and beyond.

REMEMBERING PROFESSOR DAVID COOPER AC

To mark the one-year anniversary of the passing of Professor David Cooper AC, inaugural Director of the Kirby Institute and world-renowned immunology expert, the David Cooper Memorial Fund was launched to honour David's legacy and support the continuation of his great work.

Friends, colleagues and followers of David's career joined his family to fill out the Berg Family Foundation Seminar Room to celebrate David's life. In honour of David's memory, in addition to launching the David Cooper Memorial Fund, UNSW Sydney and the Kirby Institute officially renamed the Kirby Institute Boardroom to the David Cooper Boardroom in commemoration of the world-renowned academic.

Referring to Professor Cooper as "one of UNSW's greatest", UNSW Chancellor David Gonski recalled meeting him at a dinner party almost 30 years ago. After learning of David's brilliant work, passion to save lives and advance medical research, Gonski shared that he left the party a changed man, ready to commit himself passionately to contributing to society through his own philanthropy.

David Cooper Memorial Fund launch and naming of the David Cooper Boardroom.

Left to right: Professor Anthony Kelleher, Professor Ian Jacobs, Mrs Dorrie Cooper, Ms Bec Cooper, Ms Illana Cooper and Chancellor David Gonski.

Gonski described David as "a quiet, humble man who managed to drive through enormous change and advancement in his area of medicine." His enduring legacy is a commitment to achieve the widespread prevention, treatment and cure of infectious diseases, and David firmly advocated health as a fundamental human right in all of his endeavours.

David passed away in March 2018, and later that year he was posthumously made Companion in the General Division of the Order of Australia (AC), for his service to medicine in the area of HIV/AIDS research.

Addressing the room, Professor Ian Jacobs, UNSW President and Vice-Chancellor, vowed to continue Professor Cooper's great work at UNSW, officially launching the new David Cooper Memorial Fund, through which the public may support the Kirby Institute in continuing on the path laid out by Professor Cooper.

David's wife, Dorrie Cooper, expressed her gratitude to those who attended in honour of her late husband, as well as her belief in Professor Anthony Kelleher as David's successor, stating "David's work is left in good hands."

"What Professor Cooper has done for humanity, at a global scale, cannot be overstated. Today, the impacts of his work are directly benefiting many hundreds of thousands of people. And his legacy will continue, ensuring that future generations are safeguarded, as far as possible, against HIV and other infectious diseases," said Professor Jacobs.

The launching of the David Cooper Memorial Fund reinforced the commitment of the Kirby Institute to carry on David's work with immense dedication, honour and pride.

The evening ended with the group gathering on the balcony of the new David Cooper Boardroom, looking back towards the city. Gonski commented that this was the perfect room to name to honour David Cooper, as he was an altruistic man who always looked outwards.

In keeping with David's memory, the David Cooper Memorial Fund will be seeking to continue to advance important infectious disease research for communities who are most at risk. With a priority to support scholarships and fellowships, your support of the David Cooper Memorial fund will enable promising young minds to follow David's footsteps in championing health and making a difference in communities at home and abroad.



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PROFESSOR IAN JACOBS
UNSW PRESIDENT AND VICE-CHANCELLOR





You can make a difference

Thank you to our wonderful community of supporters for your generous philanthropic support throughout the year. It is with your ongoing commitment that we are able to work with vulnerable communities around the world to prevent new infectious outbreaks, improve access to healthcare in communities impacted by infection, and train the next generation of front-line doctors to improve diagnosis of infectious diseases.

As we continue to work towards developing new therapies, preventative vaccines and better solutions for those who are currently affected by infectious diseases and those who are most at risk, we gratefully receive your support to enable our vision to become reality.

It is through the help of our supporters that the Kirby Institute is able to carry forward cutting-edge research that is improving health outcomes in Australia and around the world.

Your support will ensure that the Kirby Institute can continue to alleviate global health challenges and focus on breaking new ground in the response to epidemics.

To find out more and to make a donation, visit www.kirby.unsw.edu.au/donate or call +61 (2) 9385 0900.

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