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Media Statement

WA CANCER RESEARCHER REVEALS MELANOMA DIAGNOSIS

The head of WA's premier adult medical research institute, which houses WA's only dedicated centre investigating melanoma, has revealed his personal battle with the potentially deadly skin cancer.

Ahead of the Scott Kirkbride Melanoma Research Centre's (SKMRC) fifth annual fundraising luncheon, Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) Director Professor Peter Klinken has spoken publicly for the first time of being diagnosed with malignant melanoma.

His diagnosis came six weeks before Christmas last year after he noticed changes to a mole on his left forearm.

"I've been working as a cancer researcher for nearly 30 years and have given many talks about how one in three Australians will get it, but somehow I never thought I would be part of those statistics – I did think, 'I hope I'm not one of the one in four Australians who dies of cancer'," he said.

In a curious turn of events, Professor Klinken's long-time GP Dr Jamie Prendiville – who broke the news to him – was also Scott Kirkbride's family doctor and has been a key supporter of the SKMRC which was inspired by Scott's death from melanoma in 2004 at the age of 27.

"When I initially went to see Jamie, he removed the mole there and then as a precaution and, after I found out it was cancerous, I had a conservative re-excision. Throughout the entire process, it re-affirmed in my mind the need for more research in all areas of cancer, but now more specifically in melanoma – it had become very personal," said Professor Klinken.

"I was extraordinarily lucky that my melanoma was on a part of the body that was easy to see and that after a bit more surgery I didn't have to undergo chemotherapy or radiotherapy. However, I'm all too aware that many West Australians, like Scott, haven't been so lucky.

"And, while I've got a clean bill of health right now, the reality is that most people diagnosed with cancer live with the thought in the back of their minds that it may just rear its ugly head again, whether you go through prolonged treatment or not. The initial diagnosis certainly rocks you."

Professor Klinken said shortly after his diagnosis, he was disappointed to find out through genetic testing that a new drug showing promising early results in tackling melanoma would not benefit him, if his cancer re-emerged.

"This medication, PLX4032, targets a common mutation that occurs in half of all melanomas, but unfortunately my melanoma does not carry that particular mutation. It was a pity to discover that such a promising option wasn't going to be available to me if I needed it," he said.

"Let's hope other promising areas of melanoma treatment really take off in the near future."

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“My experience has given me an insight into just how critical research is – psychologically, research provides the hope that is so important when you’re faced with a potentially deadly disease. It has also highlighted just how much more needs to be done to uncover fresh ways of diagnosing melanoma earlier and helping develop new and improved treatments.”

In another twist of fate, over the past year Professor Klinken’s own research team has been investigating if Hls5, a tumour suppressor gene discovered by them in 2004, may possess the power to better tackle melanoma.

The research, led by Dr Louise Winteringham, has revealed the Hls5 gene – which has already been found to have the potential to help battle some breast and prostate cancers as well as leukemias – interacts with a number of key proteins involved in one of the pathways known to play a role in melanoma.

The research has been made possible thanks to the SKMRC’s Discovery Grants program, announced at the Centre’s Annual Luncheon last year.

“We’re very excited to be working on this line of research and are fiercely determined that the SKMRC will make an enormous difference in tackling melanoma,” said Professor Klinken.

Since 2005, the SKMRC has been made possible through ongoing fundraising efforts by Scott’s family and friends, as well as a generous commitment by The University of Western Australia (UWA) to match the funding dollar for dollar.

The Centre’s co-founder and Scott’s mother Yvonne Kirkbride said she was confident the WA community would continue its amazing support for the SKMRC over the next five years and beyond.

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