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Media Statement

QUEST BEGINS TO BOOST CHEMOTHERAPY EFFECTIVENESS IN MELANOMA

WA scientists have received funding for two new projects which hold promise of making chemotherapy drugs more effective in treating melanoma, as well as uncovering new ways to tackle the aggressive skin cancer.

One study will be led by Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) research associate Dr Keith Giles and one will be spearheaded by WAIMR-based Molecular Discovery Systems' scientist Dr Robin Scaife.

Both projects have received \$75,000 Discovery Grants from the Scott Kirkbride Melanoma Research Centre (SKMRC).

Details of the 2010 one-year Grants, to begin in January next year, were announced at last week's fifth annual SKMRC fundraising luncheon at Subiaco Oval.

Dr Scaife said that while new experimental drugs that targeted growth pathways involved in melanoma were showing very promising clinical results, researchers were now also realising that there were several ways to make current chemotherapy drugs more powerful.

"Although there is a substantial arsenal of anti-cancer weapons available, melanomas can be particularly challenging because they often don't respond well to chemotherapy, making them difficult to treat," he said.

"Recent investigations looking at cell division have, however, brought to light potential new strategies to target chemoresistant cancerous cells, opening up the possibility using current chemotherapy drugs with more success. By further exploiting the sensitivity of cancerous cells when they undergo division, we intend to hit melanoma cells where it hurts the most.

"The Molecular Discovery Systems laboratory at WAIMR is home to powerful, semi-automated cell imaging and analysis equipment that we will use to screen for drugs that target complex cellular properties."

Dr Scaife and his colleagues, WAIMR director Professor Peter Klinken and University of Western Australia Professor Jiak Xu will use this cutting-edge, high content imaging and analysis technology to screen large numbers of drug-like molecules. This approach has ample potential to identify new drug leads to tackle melanoma.

Dr Giles' study involved looking for new approaches to prevent melanoma growth and invasion by focusing on two microRNA molecules found to be linked to melanoma.

"We are investigating if these molecules have the power to slow the progress of melanoma cell growth, and also if their presence may make melanoma cells more sensitive to some chemotherapy drugs," said Dr Giles.

"We're very excited to be able to conduct this research as, unfortunately, melanoma rates continue to increase in Australia, with more than 10,000 cases diagnosed annually." *

* <http://www.cancer.org.au/aboutcancer/cancertypes/melanoma.htm>

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