



MEDIA STATEMENT

Verity Firth MP

**Minister for Women
Minister for Science and Medical Research
Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Cancer)
Minister Assisting the Minister for Climate Change, Environment & Water**

Wednesday, 22 August 2007

RENEWED HOPE FOR MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS SUFFERERS

NSW Government will invest half a million dollars to establish Australia's first 'brain bank' specifically dedicated to collecting and storing brain tissues for use by scientists researching a cure for multiple sclerosis (MS).

Minister for Science and Medical Research Verity Firth said MS is the most common cause of chronic neurological disability amongst young adults, with more than 18,000 Australians diagnosed with the condition – of which over 70 per cent are women.

"While the actual trigger for MS remains unknown, it is thought that genetic and environmental factors are involved," said Ms Firth.

"Current treatments can only alleviate the symptoms – a cure remains elusive.

"And despite the fact that Australia already has a number of brain banks, these facilities contain only very small quantities of MS samples.

"The MS Brain Bank aims to reverse this situation, providing scientists and clinicians with a vast library of the material they need to carry out their important work.

"In the hands of a scientist, tissue samples taken from the brain or spinal cord of a deceased MS sufferer could help to unravel one of the many secrets that still surround this illness – and ultimately bring us closer to a cure."

The MS Brain Bank – which will cost a total of \$1.3 million to set-up – will become a repository for tissue samples taken from MS sufferers who consented to making such a selfless donation prior to their deaths.

It will be linked to the National Brain Bank Network and based at the University of Sydney, where significant expertise in tissue banking already exists.

"As well as those at the University of Sydney, this new facility will also be a significant resource for researchers at Westmead and the Garvan Institute," said Ms Firth.

In addition, the NSW Government will sponsor an award for 'Medical Research into Multiple Sclerosis' as part of next year's Australian Museum Eureka Prizes Award.

"Together the MS Brain Bank and the new Eureka prize will help keep NSW at the forefront of neuropathology and neurobiology," said Ms Firth.

Funding for the MS Brain Bank will be drawn from the \$11.5 million in new money provided under the *Spinal Cord Injury and Other Neurological Conditions Fund* announced by the Premier in this year's budget.

Other key initiatives funded from this program include the recent announcement of \$500,000 to stimulate stem cell research using therapeutic cloning.

"The lemma Labor Government is making the investments necessary to ensure NSW remains a magnet for scientific endeavour and home to the world's leading researchers," said Ms Firth.

The 2007 Eureka Prize for Medical Research was awarded to Professor Levon Kachigian for outstanding research into cardiovascular disease (details attached).

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PROFILE: PROFESSOR LEVON KHACHIGIAN
NHMRC Senior Principal Research Fellow, Centre for Vascular Research
University of New South Wales



Professor Khachigian is a molecular biologist with specific interests in transcription factors that control the expression of growth factor and cell cycle regulatory genes in vascular (endothelial and smooth muscle) cells, and in novel strategies exploiting this information in the development of interventional approaches to treat and/or prevent vascular occlusive and other proliferative disorders.

Professor Khachigian's research group (comprising basic scientists and cardiologists) at the **UNSW Centre for Vascular Research** (SOMS, Department of Pathology) is focused on five principal areas of research:

- Isolation and characterisation of new genes induced or repressed by vascular cell injury;
- Mechanisms of signalling and transcriptional control in vascular endothelial cells and smooth muscle cells;
- Molecular control of vascular cell proliferation and apoptosis;
- DNazymes, siRNA and modified antisense as molecular and therapeutic tools; and
- Animal models of neointima formation, angiogenesis, tumor growth, myocardial ischemia, and inflammation.

In terms of affiliations, Professor Khachigian has strong links with the *Australian Society for Medical Research* (ASMR, Immediate-Past President) and *Australian Vascular Biology Society* (AVBS, Past President).

2007 entry for the OSMR sponsored Eureka Prize for Medical Research:

Professor Khachigian's research potentially offers many important new therapeutic solutions addressing key basic and clinical challenges in the area of cardiovascular pathology. His 2007 entry in the Eureka Prizes is for ground-breaking research that has revolutionised our understanding of transcriptional control in blood vessels using exceptionally-innovative small-molecule gene-targeting agents as inhibitors of angiogenesis, inflammation and intimal thickening.

Professor Khachigian is a previous Eureka Prize winner, having previously won the Eureka Prize for scientific research (2003): This Prize was awarded for his innovative research that has greatly increased understanding of the basic molecular mechanisms of how harmful genes are switched on and off in cells of the artery wall, and for developing new DNA-based drugs that block arterial renarrowing after balloon angioplasty and solid tumour growth. The \$10,000 prize is awarded for outstanding scientific research by an Australian scientist under the age of 40, which is judged to be under-appreciated by the Australian public.

His work is understood to have been published in leading scientific journals such as *Nature*, *Medicine* and *Science*.