SVI researchers taking aim at cancer

Image: An X-ray diffraction pattern. When an x-ray is passed through a crystallized protein, its structure deflects the x-ray beams, resulting in a diffraction pattern. A crystallographer uses the pattern of spots and the relative strength of each spot to produce a three-dimensional picture of the protein’s structure. SVI researchers are using this technology to find out why the action of certain proteins can cause cancer.
As you will read in this issue, SVI researchers had outstanding success in the most recent round of funding announced by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

The outcome of the NHMRC grants, which fund 3 year long research projects, as well as the salaries of many of our researchers, is eagerly anticipated. These competitive grants are an essential and time-consuming part of our lives as scientists. They account for around 50% of SVI’s income as a whole, and represent the sole source of external support for some of our smaller labs.

The almost $10 million in grants, announced on the 17th of October, represents the most funding we have ever received from the NHMRC. This exceptional result is a testament to the quality of the research being conducted at the Institute, highlighting the scope of the Institute’s research projects and the talent and dedication of its researchers and support staff.

It is heartening to see a range of researchers at different career stages funded in this year’s round. Professor Bruce Kemp, who has based his internationally renowned research at SVI since 1989, received two Project Grants, while half of the grants awarded were to researchers who have been at the Institute for less than 5 years and are at a relatively early stage of their careers.

There is a flip side to this exceptional result: the funding does not cover the full cost of the research being undertaken, either at SVI or at any of the other research facilities around Australia. This is where philanthropy comes in: it not only helps to bridge these gaps, but it allows us to build on our strengths by recruiting outstanding young scientists and seed funding new projects.

On this subject, we have recently received news that SVI researchers Professor Michael Parker, Associate Professor Louise Purton and Dr Carl Walkley have been awarded $2 million by the Australian Cancer Research Foundation (ACRF) to establish the ACRF Rational Drug Discovery Centre at SVI. We hope that the Centre will help give our researchers an edge in the next round of NHMRC funding, but more importantly, will lead to our research having a positive impact on the health of Australians.

Thank you for your support in 2011 – we look forward to keeping in touch and hope that you are able to continue your support in 2012. Best wishes for the Christmas season.

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The Greek physician Hippocrates (460 BC–370 BC) was the first to use the word ‘karkinos’ (meaning crab) to describe a tumour. He chose this word because the blood vessels that surrounded tumours are crab-like in shape. This is how our words ‘cancer’ and ‘carcinoma’ were derived.

Our aim is to improve these statistics: this funding from the ACRF gives us the best chance of doing so.

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The Frontier

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which we hope to make a real difference.”

The Centre is composed of four nodes, each focused on a specific step in the path towards identifying a cancer drug target. One of the instruments in the Centre’s imaging node, called a Laser Scanning Cytometer, will be the first of its kind in Australia and will give researchers the ability to do experiments that would have been very difficult previously. Louise says, “The Cytometer will allow us to identify and quantitate individual cells in a particular tissue, and at the same time to maintain their physical location. Currently it is not possible for us to do all of these things in a quantitative manner and maintain the structure of the tissue at the same time. This is very exciting for us and will represent a real leap forward in capability.”

Carl continues, “The most exciting aspect is that the Centre will give us a greater chance of translating our research to the Clinic. One in three Australian men and one in four women are directly affected by cancer before the age of 75 and over 100,000 new cases are diagnosed every year. While survival rates have increased significantly over the past 20 years, cancer remains a leading cause of death: every year over 36,000 Australians die of the disease. Our aim is to improve these statistics and this funding from the ACRF gives us the best chance of doing so.”

nationally. The funding will support the development of The ACRF Rational Drug Discovery Centre, the aim of which is to provide Australian cancer researchers with access to early stage drug discovery tools.

SVI has a unique collection of research talent that will be enhanced by the ACRF grant. Michael explains, “The aim of our Centre is to identify proteins involved in cancer, the function of which we can modify by designing drugs to interact with them. This builds on our current strengths in Structural Biology, and will focus in particular on one of SVI’s specialties: cancers of the blood and bone. Funding from the ACRF plays an essential role in Australian cancer research – it would be extremely difficult to source this amount of funding elsewhere, and in our case the scale of commitment will enable us to purchase some key platform technologies with

The SVI Scholarship Fund has supported a total of 20 Honours students and 15 PhD students to date.

Shanna Tam was one of the first students to receive an SVI Top-up Scholarship. She recently completed her PhD in SVI’s Protein Chemistry and Metabolism Unit and has taken up a postdoctoral position at Imperial College London, working in the laboratory of Professor Guy Rutter.

During her time at SVI, Shanna was fortunate to receive support from a number of philanthropic sources, with an unexpected influence on the direction of her research.

Shanna explains: “Top-up scholarships from the SVI Foundation during my Honours and PhD allowed me to concentrate on my studies, rather than have to work part-time to fund my living expenses. This made an enormous difference to me, and took off a lot of pressure.”

“In 2010, I also received a travel grant from The Harold Mitchell Foundation, which allowed me to travel to Japan for a conference. By chance I was seated next to Professor Rutter from Imperial College at the conference dinner. This initial contact and his interest in my work eventually led me to apply for a fellowship from the European Foundation for the Study of Diabetes, to fund my postdoctoral research in his lab.

In Professor Rutter’s lab I am trying to identify how the growth of pancreatic beta cells is controlled. This is important since in both type 1 and 2 diabetes, disease progression is associated with the destruction or failure of these cells, but no treatment exists to stably increase their functional mass.

I am truly grateful for the generous philanthropic support I was granted over the last few years. In the words of publisher George G. Kirstein (1906-1986): “Apart from the ballot box, philanthropy presents the one opportunity the individual has to
express his meaningful choice over the direction in which our society will progress”. My hope is that my research will provide new avenues for therapy.

On behalf of other students and researchers, I sincerely thank all supporters of SVI and medical research.”

Allison Irvin spent 2011 in the Immunology and Diabetes Unit studying for her Honours year – an additional year of studies at the end of a bachelor degree that involves a mix of advanced theory, research training and research. She was also one of three Honours students selected to receive a $5,000 SVI Foundation Scholarship. She tells us about her experience.

What’s your Honours project? I was working on type 1 diabetes, which is an autoimmune disease. We were looking at a transcription factor – a protein that binds to DNA and influences which genes are expressed in a cell. This transcription factor, called NFKB, is involved in the immune system. Previous studies showed that it might be overactive in type 1 diabetes and may contribute to the progression of the disease.

Using mice that develop type 1 diabetes in a similar way to humans, I found that, surprisingly, the NFKB protein doesn’t appear to be particularly active. However, I also found that it was more active in mice with accelerated disease. So inhibiting the action of this protein in spontaneous diabetes in humans is unlikely to be of great use in halting the disease. However, in cases where the immune system is particularly active, such as in a transplant setting where there is more of an acute destruction of the body’s insulin producing cells, inhibitors of NFKB could be useful in reducing the immune attack.

Was this an expected result? It was a surprise to us – it wasn’t what we expected to happen, but it gave me a useful lesson in how research works – it doesn’t always turn out how you expect, and that can be a good thing in the long run.

What are you planning to do next year? I would like to do a PhD with my Honours supervisor, A/Prof Helen Thomas - depending on the marks that I get! I was lucky enough to be exposed to a range of techniques during the year, and I am looking forward to being able to get more experience in the lab and use my new skills to look at another biologically interesting question.

What did you enjoy most about the year? I really liked working in the lab and discovering new things – and being the first person to know that particular fact, especially one that might help improve someone’s health.

What did you enjoy the least? Well, at the time, I didn’t particularly enjoy writing my thesis!

How did having an Honours Scholarship help you? It was particularly important for me because I am living out of home and paying my own rent and living expenses. It took a lot of pressure off me during the year and reduced one of the stresses in an otherwise busy year, making the whole experience a lot easier.

What are your goals – what do you see yourself doing eventually? I would like to end up heading a lab. After my PhD, I would like to go overseas to get some more research experience. I imagine going to a lab maybe in the U.S., where there is other cutting-edge type 1 diabetes research going on.

Steven Tonna joined SVI’s Bone Cell Biology and Disease Unit at the start of 2011. He completed his PhD in 2005, and arrived at SVI following postdoctoral stints at Brigham and Women’s Hospital/Harvard Medical School in Boston and The Baker IDI in Melbourne.

My childhood ambition was... to be successful at whatever I was focused on at the time. This ranged from playing sport, to my academic studies.

My first job was... as a private tutor for years 11–12 Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics. I found this to be most enjoyable, especially when the students achieved scores higher than anyone ever anticipated.

My worst job was... working as a Telemarketer in Collingwood. I had to deal with some very interesting characters over the phone.

My happiest moment was... travelling overseas for my first postdoctoral position in Boston, Massachusetts. I handed in my PhD thesis and 48 hours later, I was in the U.S.! This postdoc was great for my growth as a scientist and a person - I went to the U.S. as a young single guy and came home a little older and married.

I got into research because... I had always enjoyed discovering new things. I like academic research because it allows me to continually challenge myself.
Funding boost

Research at SVI has been boosted by almost $10 million in funding announced in the most recent round of the Federal Government’s National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grants.

The NHMRC’s Project Grants Scheme is the main avenue of support for individuals and small teams of Australian researchers undertaking biomedical, public health and health services research.

The funding, announced on October 17, includes Project Grants worth more than $2.4 million to support cancer research at SVI, $2.3 million for type 1 diabetes, more than $1 million for metabolism and a grant of $536,010 to boost Institute research into Alzheimer’s disease.

Metabolism
Half a million Australians suffer from type 2 diabetes. This number is not only thought to be an underestimation of the full extent of the problem, but it is also growing in size every year (along with our waistbands). Type 2 diabetes results from a combination of genetic and environmental factors, and results in damagingly high levels of glucose in the circulation.

Energy savers
Bruce Kemp was awarded two Project Grants to investigate how the body regulates its energy capacity and help increase our understanding of the intracellular signaling pathways that control energy regulation.

“We hope that a better understanding of how the body controls its energy use will help us to develop treatments against these conditions which cost so much in terms of both ill health and health care costs,” says Bruce.

Sweet death
A/Prof Helen Thomas was awarded a Project Grant to look at the effect of high blood sugar on beta cells. “We plan to look at the pathways in beta cells that are stimulated by high levels of glucose and fatty acids, and to determine if these pathways are turned on in the pancreas of patients with type 2 diabetes. Our aim is to identify targets for new therapies,” she says.

Alzheimer’s Disease
Alzheimer’s Disease is the most common form of dementia. It is a degenerative brain condition, characterised by memory loss and increasingly impaired cognitive function, commonly diagnosed in people over 65 years of age. The cost of Alzheimer’s in Australia is estimated at more than $3.6 billion per year. As our society ages, the burden of the disease on our society is increasing.

Drugs against Alzheimer’s
Professor Michael Parker was awarded $536,010 to investigate the molecular causes of Alzheimer’s Disease. “The enormous economic and social costs of Alzheimer’s and an aging population make it a major health problem. In this project we are working to identify the atomic structures of proteins centrally involved in the disease, to increase our understanding of the molecular mechanisms of the disease and form a basis for the design of drugs to combat it."

Type 1 diabetes
Six Australians are diagnosed with diabetes every day, many of them children. People with type 1 diabetes lack insulin, the hormone that regulates the body’s use of glucose. Insulin is produced by beta cells in the pancreas. In type 1 diabetes, these cells are mistakenly attacked and destroyed by the body’s own immune system. Without the ability to produce insulin, people with type 1 diabetes are dependent on insulin injections.

Gene hunter
Dr Tom Brodnicki, head of SVI’s Immunogenetics Laboratory, received two project grants to further his work into the genetic and environmental factors that may increase the risk of developing autoimmune diseases, such as type 1 diabetes.

Tom says, “These grants focus on the role of two different genes in autoimmune disease and how they affect the immune cells that are important for fighting microbial infections. As up to 10% of the population develop an autoimmune disease, the goal of this research is to find ways to regulate the improper immune responses that lead to autoimmune disease in at-risk individuals.”

Stopping the destruction
Professor Tom Kay was awarded a Project Grant to help his group develop strategies to prevent the immune system from destroying pancreatic beta cells. “We aim to find new ways of preventing type 1 diabetes after immune destruction of the beta cells has already begun. This is the point at which we are more likely to be able to intervene in humans,” he says.

Cancer
One in three Australian men and one in four women are affected by cancer before the age of 75. Whilst survival rates have increased over the past 20 years, cancer is a leading cause of death in Australia: more than 100 Australians die every day from the disease.

Cancers of the blood
Carl Walkley from the Stem Cell Regulation Unit was awarded two Project Grants to forward his research on red blood cells and their production. “Our work is based around how the bone marrow affects red blood cell production and how this can go wrong in certain pre-cancerous conditions.”

Familial cancer
SVI’s newest recruit, Dr Andrew Deans was awarded two Project Grants to work on the familial cancer syndromes Fanconi Anaemia and Bloom’s Syndrome. “People who inherit these conditions have an increased risk of developing cancer. Both conditions are caused by mutations in genes normally involved in protecting against DNA damage. By understanding what can go wrong, we hope to find new ways to protect against cancer and unlock new treatment strategies in both the affected families and, more broadly, in the general population.”

Preventing cancer
Associate Professor Jörg Heierhorst was awarded $618,675 to investigate a protein that his group has discovered that is involved in DNA damage repair. “Each human cell is exposed to more than 10,000 spontaneous DNA damage events per day. Inaccurate repair of this damage is believed to be one of the key events in the onset of cancer. By understanding the protein that we discovered, called ASCIZ, contributes to the repair of DNA base damage, and also has a separate function in the onset of lung development. We will be studying how it functions in DNA repair and thereby keeps mutation rates low to prevent cancer.”
at the Myer Mural Hall with guest speaker Tony Abbott; SVI Discovery Day – the match between Collingwood and St Kilda at the MCG, which raised more than $50,000 for research into juvenile diabetes; and the Newcrest Mining SVI Charity Golf day, which raised $107,000 for heart disease. The SVI Support Group hosted a dinner for 188 guests at the Athenaeum Club, raising $35,000 for the SVI Scholarship Fund, and the Susan Alberti Charitable Foundation Signature Ball raised $300,000 to help support the Islet Transplant Program at SVI.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our loyal supporters, volunteers, donors and of course my fellow Foundation Board members for their dedication to the cause of helping those touched by disease.

I wish you all a safe and happy holiday season.

Sue Alberti AO HonLLD
SVI Foundation Chair

How you have helped

Generous contributions from SVI supporters allow SVI to offer student scholarships to the best and brightest Honours and PhD students. In 2011, ten PhD students and three Honours students were supported.

A number of new pieces of equipment are now available to researchers at SVI and the wider campus thanks to generous donations from SVI supporters and from Trusts and Foundations. This includes equipment that will be used to investigate the causes of Alzheimer’s disease, to measure changes in bone cell behaviour in diseases such as osteoporosis and arthritis, and to help detect cancer metastasis in animal models of bone cancer.

SVI’s Childhood Diabetes Appeal was launched at the Julia Gillard Luncheon in December 2010. Since that time over $450,000 has been raised to support SVI researchers working to improve the lives of people with type 1 diabetes.

Travel awards from The Harold Mitchell Foundation, the Cass Foundation and The Australian and New Zealand Bone and Mineral Society supported SVI researchers travelling to international conferences and visiting renowned labs at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Yale University in Connecticut, as well as in Colorado, Minnesota and New York.

The Foundation

The year that was

SVI Foundation Chair Susan Alberti discusses the SVI Foundation’s work in 2011.

The SVI Foundation is proud to be able to help researchers at SVI in their fight against common diseases that affect all Australians, either directly or indirectly.

The 18 Foundation Board members each played a significant role in our fundraising efforts in 2011, for which I am very grateful.

The year was kick-started with a luncheon for fifty $10,000 Discovery Fund members and friends hosted by Christine and Sam Tarascio at their home, and ended with a luncheon in the Myer Holdings Boardroom, hosted by the Chairman of Myer, Howard McDonald.

Board members were kept busy during the year at other Foundation events: a Luncheon at the Myer Mural Hall with guest speaker Tony Abbott; SVI Discovery Day – the match between Collingwood and St Kilda at the MCG, which raised more than $50,000 for research into juvenile diabetes; and the Newcrest Mining SVI Charity Golf day, which raised $107,000 for heart disease. The SVI Support Group hosted a dinner for 188 guests at the Athenaeum Club, raising $35,000 for the SVI Scholarship Fund, and the Susan Alberti Charitable Foundation Signature Ball raised $300,000 to help support the Islet Transplant Program at SVI.

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Sue Alberti AO HonLLD
SVI Foundation Chair

2012 Diary

| February | SVI $10,000 Discovery Fund Luncheon |
| March | SVI 1000 Club Event |
| April 30 | SVI Tour/Dinner |
| May | SVI Forum |
| June 4 | SVI Tour/Dinner |
| August | Susan Alberti Charitable Foundation Ball |
| August 20 | SVI Tour/Dinner |
| September | SVI 1000 Club Event |
| October | SVI Support Group – Black Tie Dinner |
| October | SVI Golf Day |
| October 29 | SVI Tour/ Dinner |
| November | City2Sea Fun Run |
| Date TBC | SVI Discovery Day |
| Date TBC | Young Professional Group Event |

Image: Sue Alberti presents Tom Kay with a cheque representing the proceeds from the 2011 SACF Signature Ball towards the Islet Transplant Program

Image: Julia Gillard speaks with SVI researchers Tom Kay, Tom Brodnicki and Stuart Mannering at the Launch of the Childhood Diabetes Appeal in December 2010
The SVI support group

for a number of years the hard-working SVI Support Group, chaired by Claire O’Callaghan, have been supporting SVI student scholarships. To date the group has raised an incredible $152,500, which has supported nine Honours students and nine PhD students.

This year their Annual Black Tie Dinner, held on October 14th at the Athenaeum Club, attracted 188 guests and raised $35,000.

SVI would like to thank Claire, her Committee and all those who attended the dinner or who donated in lieu of attending.

SVI Support Group
Mrs Claire O’Callaghan (Chair)
Mrs Margaret Batrouney
Mrs Maureen Breheny
Mrs Colleen Bolton
Mrs Cathy Clancy
Ms Bernadette Dennis
Mrs Cathy Gilbert
Mrs Angela Griss
Ms Barbara Handley
Mrs Carole Hart
Ms Jo Lonergan
Mrs Margaret Lorkin
Mrs Gail McHale
Mrs Geraldine Peck
Ms Faye Reeve
Mrs Dawn Hill-Regan
Mrs Rosalea Rogers
Mrs Judy Ryan
Mrs Christina Westmore-Peyton
Mrs Therese Whiting
Mrs Natalie Woodley
Mrs Thecla Xipell

Insuring hope

Peter McCarthy, Executive Director and Richard Coloretti, Chief Executive Officer of Edgewise Insurance Brokers are keen supporters of SVI.

Having first been involved as a sponsor of the 2009 SVI Charity Golf Day, the relationship has grown into a strong partnership.

SVI has become one of the Edgewise preferred charities, receiving commissions from some of their insurance policies. Since February 2010 Edgewise has donated approximately $13,000 to medical research at SVI and recently hosted a barbecue for their staff to make this announcement. Richard Coloretti said ‘We are proud to support SVI and would recommend other companies support this world class medical research institute. The research undertaken at SVI is vital to the health of the whole community.’

To find out more about Edgewise and the partnership visit www.edgewise.com.au

Giving in celebration

Ricky and Amanda Smorgon’s daughter Isabella (age 12), pictured at her recent Bat Mitzvah, raised $7,500 for SVI’s cancer research programs. Isabella chose to forego presents from her guests in honour of her grandmother, Ros Smorgon, who passed away in 2008. All donations will go towards the Ros Smorgon Memorial Fund at SVI.

Isabella said “Giving to SVI was my way of contributing to hope for those suffering diseases such as cancer, as my grandmother did. I hope the scientists at SVI will be able to find a cure for cancer in the future.”

A gift to SVI has the potential to make an enormous difference to the lives of many.

If you would like to consider giving in memory or in celebration, please contact Clare Lacey, Development Manager on (03) 9288 2480.
Teeing up for SVI

The SVI/Newcrest Mining Golf Day, held on the 17th of October at the Albert Park Golf Course was a huge success, with more than 120 players raising over $100,000 for heart research at the Institute.

The day was kicked off with a golf clinic from Bruce Green, golfing professional at Royal Melbourne, and following 18 holes, continued with oyster shucking, Grange Hermitage wine tasting and dinner at the Lago restaurant overlooking the course.

Greg Robinson, CEO of Newcrest Mining (Gold Sponsor), said of the day: “Newcrest is proud to sponsor the event for SVI and very pleased that many of our suppliers chose to be involved.”

The Ausenco Services team, Frank Mellish, Greg Christfield, Paul Young and Stuart Gowans were the winners of the Jack Holt Trophy presented by Melbourne Racing Club Chairman Mike Symons (it was racehorse trainer Jack Holt’s bequest in 1951 that led to the establishment of SVI).

Through auctions, raffles and sponsorship, $107,000 was raised for heart research at SVI. This brings the total money raised since the inaugural event to $236,000.

SVI would like to thank all the pro bono sponsors and those who donated auction and raffle prizes. We are also grateful to the Golf Committee, chaired by Michael Dwyer and consisting of Leon Wiegard, Michael Kay, Mark Kerr, Barry Holbrook and Charlie Happell, who worked tirelessly throughout the year to ensure the success of the event.

Professor Tom Kay said “The Golf Day is an important event on the SVI calendar and we are very grateful to all those involved. The funds raised help our researchers find new strategies for the prevention and treatment of heart disease.”

Funding the future

SVI’s $10,000 Discovery Fund aims to accumulate a minimum of $5 million of capital, the income from which will be used to support vital research at SVI. We would like to thank all the members of the $10,000 Discovery Fund: Sue Alberti AO, Joe Arcaro Architects, Graeme Briggs, Anthony Burgess, Enzo Ceravolo, Michael Cole, Frank Costa OAM, Maria Foti, Andrew and Lyn Henderson, SI Capital, GoldAge-Aged Care, John Macfarlane, Howard McDonald, Colin North, Barry and Karen Plant, Schiavello Group Pty Ltd, Brenda Shanahan, The Simpson Family Foundation, Rod and Jan Spooner, Sam and Christine Tarascio, Sam and Carmen Tarascio, Zagame Corporation and an anonymous donor. We would also like to thank Bruce and Rosalie Heymanson for their donation to the Fund in 2011.
THE SEASON OF HOPE NEVER ENDS.

From all of us at SVI, thank you for supporting our vital medical research this year. To you, your family and loved ones, enjoy a wonderful holiday season and a happy 2012.

Researchers at SVI are working with cells such as those pictured in the images, to find new treatments for diseases like breast cancer and type 1 diabetes.
Donating to SVI

1. Donate now to SVI
I/We want to make a single donation of:
- $25
- $50
- $100
- $500
- $1000
- Other $

I/We want to make an annual gift of:
- $25
- $50
- $100
- $500
- $1000
- Other $

2. I/We want to join the 1000 Club
I/We want to make an annual donation of $1000 for:
- 1 year
- 3 years
- 5 years
- Other

Type of membership:
- New
- Renewing
- Private
- Corporate

3. I/We want to join the SVI $10,000 Discovery Fund
Amount to be donated $10,000 over 5 years – Total $50,000
Or ☐ Please contact me to discuss further

4. I would like to discuss leaving a bequest in my Will
Please contact Clare Lacey at SVI on (03) 9288 2480.

Donation payment details
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☐ Name on card
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☐ Amount being paid $
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SVI is endorsed as a tax deductible gift recipient. All donations over $2 are tax deductible. SVIMR ABN: 52 004 705 640. Please return to: St Vincent’s Institute of Medical Research, 9 Princess St, Fitzroy, VIC 3065 Tel: 03 9288 2480 Fax: 03 9416 2676 Email: enquiries@svi.edu.au Web: www.svi.edu.au