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Prestigious Viertel medical research fellowships announced

The prestigious annual Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation Senior Medical Research Fellowships have been announced for 2017. In addition, three new clinical investigator awards were announced.

Last year the Viertel Foundation demonstrated its commitment to encouraging excellence and gender equality in the fields of medical and scientific research with the decision to award a Fellowship to one male, and one female researcher each year.

This year, the number of fellowships increased to three following a new collaboration between the Viertel Foundation and Bellberry Limited, a national, private not-for-profit organisation providing streamlined scientific and ethical review of human research projects across Australia. The Viertel Foundation has also awarded three clinical investigators.

The Senior Medical Research Fellowship recipients are:

- **Dr Lucy Palmer**, Senior Research Fellow at the Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health (Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellow)
- **Dr Seth Masters**, Laboratory Lead - Inflammation Division at The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research (Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellow)
- **Associate Professor Marnie Blewitt**, Laboratory Head and faculty member – Molecular Medical Division at The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research. (Bellberry-Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellow).

Each Fellow will receive \$1.225 million (\$245,000 per year for five years) to undertake leading-edge research in their area of expertise, making it the most prestigious mid-career medical research award in Australia.

Three Clinical Investigator Awards were also announced:

- Dr Dion Stubs at Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute
- Dr Brenton Hordacre of the University of Adelaide
- Dr Jakob Begun of Mater Health Services.

The clinical investigation awards were established by the Viertel Foundation to stimulate and encourage clinical research in Australia; in particular to assist new investigators to establish their research programs at the time of the difficult transition from doctoral and post-doctoral training posts to their first definitive clinical positions in an academic environment. Each recipient receives \$85,000.

The Chairman of the Viertel Foundation's Medical Advisory Board, Professor Peter Leedman said the collaboration with Bellberry will allow the Foundation to support even more high-calibre mid-career researchers, as the Foundation has done for more than 20 years. The Foundation has now awarded 43 Senior Medical Research Fellowships since 1995.

"It is critical for support to be available to ensure that opportunities and encouragement is available at the mid-career level of science and research. This is where experience and talent converts to true innovation and leadership for the future," said Professor Leedman. "The Viertel Foundation firmly believes in this investment in the future and is proud to support the work of the 2016 recipients."

"Equity Trustees is proud to manage this Foundation in partnership with our fellow trustees – Mr George Curphey OAM (Chairman), Mr Rex Freudenberg, Justice Debra Mullins," said Mick O'Brien, Managing Director, Equity Trustees.

"The Viertel Foundation is one of the largest in Australia and distributes more than \$7.5 million per year to charitable organisations and for medical research purposes. The Foundation's substantial and long term commitment to the field of scientific and medical research and its efforts to promote gender equity in the research sector are impressive," Mr O'Brien concluded.

Applications are now open for the next round of Senior Medical Research and Clinical Investigator Awards (closing at the end of April). Click the link for more about the [Viertel Charitable Foundation](#) and [Bellberry](#).

For a brief summary of each of the fellowships, see next page.

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Continued....

Fellowship Research summaries

Dr Lucy Palmer, [Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health](#)
Decoding the brain: how do we make decisions?

We commonly ask ourselves 'why did I choose to do that?' and scientifically speaking, the answer is 'we don't know'. Although we make thousands of decisions throughout the day, what happens in the brain during these thoughts and how we are able to rationalise decisions is largely unknown. Dr Palmer will investigate the activity within different brain regions during the process of making a decision. These experiments will reveal the brain function during decision-making leading to a greater understanding of why people make certain decisions. Impaired decision-making costs the Australian public millions of dollars each year as bad decisions can lead to a lifetime of drug-dependency, jail, or even loss of life. Furthermore, these results will also greatly benefit the Australian community by helping us in understanding many diseases of the brain where decision-making is impaired, such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, depression and schizophrenia.

Dr Seth Masters, [Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research](#)
The inflammasome and autoinflammatory disease

There are two arms to the immune system: one that learns and adapts, which can cause autoimmune disease, and another that is immediate and innate, which can cause autoinflammatory disease. Previously, rare genetic mutations were discovered that affect innate immune genes and cause inherited autoinflammatory diseases that can be fatal. This proposal continues Dr Master's work in the characterisation of rare genetic autoinflammatory diseases, and extrapolates these studies to more common chronic inflammatory diseases. This stands to improve current diagnosis and treatment, and elucidate future drug targets that could be targeted clinically.

Associate Professor Marnie Blewitt, [Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research](#)
Screening and characterisation of mammalian epigenetic modifiers

Switching genes on and off is enabled in part by chemical tags placed on the DNA, called epigenetic marks. This form of epigenetic control is critical for normal development, but also goes wrong in many diseases. A/Prof Blewitt is proposing to use high throughput screens to find new proteins involved in epigenetic control; without knowing all of the proteins important for this process, it will be challenging to piece together how it occurs. The focus is on a protein identified in a previous screen, called SMCHD1, which plays an important role in muscular dystrophy and other diseases. We are working out how SMCHD1 switches genes off, and how we can modulate SMCHD1 activity with drugs to treat disease.