

30 October 2025

\$90 million investment in Australian health research marks 30-year milestone

Three of Australia's brightest researchers awarded \$4.125m today in latest Viertel Fellowships to fight cancer, respiratory disease and more.

One of Australia's largest charitable foundations, the Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation, is celebrating three decades of transforming Australian healthcare – with more than \$90 million invested in medical research and a legacy of breakthroughs that are saving lives. Viertel Fellowships support some of Australia's best and brightest researchers and clinicians, with 70 Fellowships awarded to date.

"The Viertel alumni is a who's who of global leaders in medical research. Professor Melissa Little AC, whose Fellowship was awarded in 1997, is internationally recognised for her extraordinary research generating kidney organoids from human stem cells," said General Manager of Philanthropy and Community Trustee Services at Equity Trustees, **Jodi Kennedy**.

"Receiving a Viertel Fellowship was a defining step in my independent research career, enabling me to build the knowledge around kidney development that would take me on to recreating human kidney tissue," said **Professor Little AC**.

Today, the Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation, in association with Bellberry, announced the recipients of the 2025 Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellowships. Three outstanding Australian mid-career researchers who are advancing solutions for major illnesses including cancer, cardiovascular disease, and neurodegenerative diseases.

The 2025 Viertel Senior Medical Research Fellows, who will each receive \$1.375 million over five years to support their work, are:

1. **Dr Joanna Achinger-Kawecka** for her work in advancing cancer therapy utilising innovative 3D chromatin structure mapping technology.
2. **Dr Dustin Flanagan** for addressing the impact of direct cell damage on gastric cancer initiation and progression.
3. **Associate Professor Zongyuan Ge** for developing a personalised healthcare model integrating diverse patient information collected over time via AI.

Kylie Sproston, CEO of Bellberry said: "Bellberry is proud to collaborate with the Viertel Foundation to offer these prestigious fellowships which enable life-changing medical research in areas which impact us all. This collaboration demonstrates the profound impact that sustained philanthropic giving can have on people's lives."

Professor Christina Mitchell AO, Co-Chair of the Viertel Foundation's Medical Advisory Board, added: "The legacy of the Viertel Fellowships over 30 years for medical research outcomes in Australia is extraordinary. Our congratulations go to this year's recipients – their research has the potential to make a lasting difference to health and wellbeing."



Viertel Foundation – making an impact in medical research

Managed in collaboration with co-Trustees the Honourable Justice Debra Mullins AO (Chair), Paul de Silva, and Peter Evans, the Viertel Foundation was established with an initial bequest of \$60 million: the Foundation is now worth around \$260 million and distributes approximately \$9 million annually. The Foundation has been making an impact for 30 years in the following ways:

- 70 fellowships have been awarded since 1995, each currently providing \$1.375 million over five years to support Australia's top mid-career researchers.
- 162 Clinical Investigator Awards providing \$90,000 over one year have been granted, supporting early-career clinicians and stimulating clinical research across Australia.
- Research infrastructure grants totalling \$2.45 million have been awarded, recognising the importance of establishing and maintaining the facilities required for world-class research environments.
- The combined total value of the Clinical Investigator Awards, the Fellowships, and infrastructure grants – including the most recent awards has reached a remarkable \$90,001,250. This substantial investment underscores the Foundation's enduring commitment to advancing medical research and improving health outcomes for Australians.
- Funding has enabled breakthroughs in cancer, infectious diseases, respiratory illnesses, dementia, stem cell research, and more – directly impacting millions of Australians each year.

More about the Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation is available [here](#).

More about Bellberry is available [here](#).

FELLOWSHIP RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARIES

Dr Joanna Achinger-Kawecka, SAiGENCI (Viertel Fellow)

Transposable elements (TEs), which are mobile remnants of ancient viral DNA, comprise over 50% of the human genome. Specific TEs are known to activate, regulate or modify human genes, in both disease and normal physiology, yet they are typically excluded from high throughput genomic analyses and their global contributions to gene regulation remain remarkably underexplored. TEs are often hijacked in cancer to drive oncogenic gene expression. Paradoxically, reactivation of TEs in cancer cells can inhibit tumour growth.

Dr Achinger-Kawecka's research program will establish TEs as universal regulatory elements driving genome evolution, uncovering how TEs influence gene regulation, 3D chromatin architecture and immune response in cancer. Further, by leveraging the 'atlas of TEs' developed during the Fellowship and engaging with clinicians, pharmaceutical companies, industry and cancer biologists, she will demonstrate how TEs can be therapeutically exploited in cancer therapy, filling a critical gap in the field of systems genome biology.

Dr Dustin Flanagan, Monash Biomedicine Discovery Institute (Viertel Fellow)

More than 90% of all cancer-related deaths are caused by metastasis and drug resistance. At the heart of both processes is the ability of tumour cells to change their cell state, shifting between proliferative, quiescent, migratory, or stem-like states in response to environmental cues. Emerging evidence suggests that prior inflammatory exposure from infection and/or lifestyle (diet/alcohol) fundamentally alters epithelial cell identity, driving cells into a tissue repair-like state that, if left unresolved, increases their potential to become cancerous.

Dr Flanagan's vision is to uncover how tissue damage contributes to gastric cancer initiation and progression – particularly cancer metastasis and drug resistance – and identify new intervention



points to slow or stop disease. To achieve this, he will build on his significant discoveries about stem cells in the gut and stomach and how they are regulated, to explore how damage-associated regenerative programs influence stem cells and their niche to drive gastric cancer.

Associate Professor Zongyuan Ge, Monash AIM for Health Lab (Bellberry-Viertel Fellow)

Current AI systems in medicine are narrow, opaque and often examine data in isolation, analysing images or patient history separately. This siloed approach limits AI's ability to leverage the complete picture of an individual's health, hindering breakthroughs in early disease diagnosis, prognosis of health changes over time, and personalised treatments.

Associate Professor Ge's goal is to create Australia's first Unified Phenotype Foundation Model – a powerful, generalist AI trained on the nation's unique and vast health data resources, capable of learning holistically from the rich, diverse spectrum of patient information (images, scans, clinical notes, biological signals, long-term history) that comprehensively defines their phenotype. It will become a transformative engine driving earlier diagnoses, more accurate prognoses, the discovery of novel health biomarkers, and tailored management strategies for major Australian health burdens, like cardiovascular disease, skin cancer, and neurodegenerative diseases.

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

Natasha Moldrich
Honner PR
0404 863 267
natasha@honner.com.au

Alison Rogers
Bellberry Media Enquiries
0488 995 868
alisonrogers@bellberry.com.au

Equity Trustees was established in 1888 for the purpose of providing independent and impartial Trustee and Executor services to help families throughout Australia protect their wealth. As Australia's leading specialist trustee company, we offer a diverse range of services to individuals, families and corporate clients including asset management, estate planning, philanthropic services and Responsible Entity (RE) services for external Fund Managers. Equity Trustees is the brand name of EQT Holdings Limited (ABN 22 607 797 615) and its subsidiary companies, publicly listed company on the Australian Securities Exchange (ASX: EQT) with offices in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. Philanthropy services are provided by Equity Trustees Wealth Services Limited (ABN 33 006 132 332) (AFSL 234528), part of the EQT group of companies.