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Prestigious medical research fellowship takes stand on gender equity in 2015 award announcement

Australia's most prestigious mid-career medical research Fellowships has embedded gender equity in its awards – starting this year the national Sylvania and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation Senior Medical Research Fellowships are being awarded to one male and one female outstanding mid-career scientist, making their mark with medical research that shows great promise for the future.

The winners of the 2016 Sylvania and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation Senior Medical Research Fellowships are Dr Marie-Liesse Asselin-Labat - Group Leader, Stem Cells and Cancer division, Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research; and Dr Thomas Gebhardt - Senior Research Fellow, Department of Microbiology & Immunology at the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection & Immunity (The University of Melbourne).

The Chairman of the Viertel Foundation's Medical Advisory Board, Professor Peter Leedman said the Foundation's Medical Advisory Board had made the recommendation to the Trustees for Fellowships to be awarded to one man and one woman each year in recognition that gender equity in science was a significant issue and that in recent years the Awards had seen a growing prevalence of male recipients.

Four years ago a little over half of all recipients of this Fellowship were women scientists, but over the past four years this had slipped to a little over a third.

"This decision, one focused on bringing gender equity to the Fellowship, was based on the observation that in the past several years no woman had been awarded a Fellowship," said Prof Leedman.

"This seemed out of step with the high quality of science being conducted around Australia by top young female scientists. As a consequence, the Board changed the assessment process for 2015, and it was extremely impressed with the outstanding quality in both female and male applicant categories. With the support of the Viertel Foundation Trustees, the Medical Advisory Board will continue this approach going forward."

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. The Foundation has now awarded 40 Senior Medical Research Fellowships since 1995.

Tabitha Lovett, Equity Trustees General Manager of Philanthropy, said the Trustees welcomed the progressive recommendation, which ensured the Foundation retained its focus on promoting the pursuit of excellence in scientific research – by supporting young researchers at a critical time in their careers.

"The Sylvania and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation is one of Australia's largest foundations and distributes more than \$7.5 million per year to charitable organisations and for medical research purposes," she said.

"Equity Trustees is proud to manage this Foundation in partnership with our fellow trustees - Mr George Curphey OAM, Mr Rex Freudenberg, Justice Debra Mullins - and its commitment to assisting the science industry to do better and to take action to make gender equality a part of what

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it stands for in science," Ms Lovett said.

Click here for more about the [Viertel Charitable Foundation](#).

Research summaries

Dr Marie-Liesse Asselin-Labat, Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research

"Regulation of lung stem cells in development and disease": Breathing air at birth depends on the generation of normal lung structures. Using multiple approaches, Dr Asselin-Labat's team aims to identify factors that control embryonic lung development and adult lung remodelling by stem cells. This will define the molecular events that are critical in normal lung formation that may be altered in lung disorders such as respiratory distress syndrome of prematurity, and will have a significant impact on the future management of lung diseases.

Dr Thomas Gebhardt, Peter Doherty Institute for Infection & Immunity (The University of Melbourne)

"Immune defence in peripheral organs": The surfaces of our body are continually under threat from microbes and viruses that may cause debilitating disease. Our ability to resist or control such infections relies on our immune system, consisting of a large number of different cell types with specialised functions. While some immune cells travel through the blood, others may preferentially reside in tissues. Dr Gebhardt's team was the first to describe a type of immune cells that permanently guard barrier tissues such as skin and gut where they provide local protection from renewed infection. They will study these frontline cells in a range of models to understand how precisely they control local infection and whether they may also contribute to other diseases, such as cancer. It is envisaged these studies will find new ways to harness these peripheral immune cells in order to prevent or treat infectious diseases, chronic inflammation or cancer.

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