



## **The Hon. Greg Hunt MP**

Minister for Health

Minister for Sport

### **TRANSCRIPT**

4 February

#### **MELBOURNE DOORSTOP**

*E&OE...*

*Topics: Launch of the Turnbull Government's \$125 million NHMRC funding into medical research*

#### **GREG HUNT:**

Australia has an extraordinary tradition of medical research and today, World Cancer Day, is an advance on that extraordinary history.

We think of Howard Florey, and Macfarlane Burnet, Ian Fraser, and the Australian of the Year this year Alan Mackay-Sim and our extraordinary female researchers, people such as Fiona Stanley, Fiona Wood, Elizabeth Blackburn.

And around us today we have others who are carrying on that extraordinary research and tradition.

People such as Professor Anne Kelso from the NHMRC, Professor Bob Thomas who's leading work at Cancer Australia, Professor Joe Trapani, here, who is an extraordinary medical cancer and oncology leader within the Peter MacCallum Institute and clinic services.

And of course the heads of Peter MacCallum, Maxine Morand and Felicity Topp – and I might say that I'm delighted both started life as nurses.

My mother was a nurse, my wife is a nurse and to see these nurses aspire to be heads of the profession is a great message.

Maxine, of course, is somebody who's had a public and successful battle with breast cancer and also an extraordinary career in public health administration.

So against that background I want to briefly address cancer, our long term national health plan and our grand announcement today.

In terms of cancer, today is World Cancer Day and no country is doing better in the fight against cancer than Australia, our survival rates are at world best.

But we do know that more than 130,000 people are likely to be diagnosed with some form of cancer this year, tragically more than 47,000 will lose that battle in all likelihood.

But we have seen brilliant examples of survivors such as Jim and Kerry today who in all likelihood would never have made it but for the work of Peter MacCallum and all the associated researchers around Australia. Against that background, we know that we need to continue to do more in cancer.

If you think of the three stages of research where we've contributed, across different governments, a billion dollars over the last half-dozen years, of prevention where there are the three national screening programs in terms of bowel cancer, in terms of breast cancer, and in terms of cervical cancer.

And then in terms of treatment where this magnificent facility, almost half funded by the Federal Government but supported by everybody, is right at the global forefront.

Then we come to where this fits within our national, long-term health plan that we're building.

(1) Rock-solid commitment to support for Medicare and universal healthcare with funding growing every year.

(2) A deep, rock-solid commitment to our hospital system, both public and private that work together, with funding growing every year.

(3) The third pillar being our deep and my personal, passionate commitment to mental health and preventive health and support for indigenous health, something so profound to so many Australians.

(4) Medical research where we bring together the work of the NHMRC, the Biomedical Translation Fund, and the Medical Research Future Fund - three essential elements.

Within that, I am delight to announce today, that through the leadership of Professor Anne Kelso and so many other medical researchers, the Australian Government will allocate \$125 million to new medical research grants for 110 different projects.

These projects include \$13.2 million for the work of Joe Trapani, Peter MacCallum, and the University of Melbourne on cancer immunotherapy.

What does it mean? It means teaching the body and giving it the tools to fight back against cancer, it gives people such as Jim and Kerry a chance at life, and the chance to have a long-term future, and to beat this dreaded disease.

And they're doing it, our researchers are doing it, so our funding helps our researchers to help people like Jim and Kerry.

That's what it's all about. Moreover, \$39 million will go to cancer research across the country, \$30 million to dementia, something of such significance in an ageing population.

\$12 million to indigenous health, a critical topic, and almost \$10 million to mental health research.

On top of the more than four billion dollars a year that the Commonwealth gives to mental health treatment and diagnosis, and in particular, working with young people.

So, I want to say thank you and congratulations to our researchers. I'll be happy to take any questions after Joe has made some comments. Over to you, Joe.

**JOE TRAPANI:**

Many thanks, Minister and wow, you explained it beautifully. Actually, I could throw away most of my notes, quite frankly.

**GREG HUNT:**

I've got a good tutor.

**JOE TRAPANI:**

That's fantastic. So welcome to Peter Mac, welcome to the wonderful Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre, our new home here.

Let me just reiterate a warm welcome also to Peter Mac's Board Chair, Maxine Morand, to the CEO of the NHMRC, my old friend and colleague Professor Anne Kelso, herself a very distinguished immunologist, Professor Bob Thomas, and Professor Grant McArthur there, who will very soon take up the new role of Chief Executive of the VCCC.

Minister, thanks so much for your very generous and far-sighted remarks. Thanks to the Federal Government for making this absolutely fantastic award possible to us. It's very significant funding, it's made of course through the auspices of our wonderful NHMRC.

Let me say though, that although this is a five-year grant, to do really big science, the sorts of discoveries that we are now rolling out to patients, takes long-term funding certainty and this scheme we're fortunate enough, we feel privileged that this is the fourth time we've received five years of funding, so this will take us through to 2022.

I hope, and when I think even greater discoveries will come along. But many of these bigger, blue sky, collaborative projects really take a long time to get off the ground so the far-sightedness of the schemes like this are absolutely critical to these really big achievements coming through.

So thank you for that as well, Minister, and we feel, as I say, incredibly humbled to be receiving our fourth vote of confidence in the work that we do.

So this is incredibly exciting for us as the recipients and I could spend a while talking about what it means to us scientists.

We spent 20 years trying to get something to work that, we were told by the sceptics, would be extremely difficult, even impossible perhaps, and that is our dream of mobilising the patient's own immune system to fight their cancer.

But really it's not about us at all. As the Minister said, this award is about new hope, it's about new life that our immune-based therapies are providing for ordinary people like Jim and Kerry, and for the whole cancer community, that's what this is all about.

And that's what really inspires and delights the clinicians and scientists here at Peter Mac, and drives us to do even more. Really, really important.

So what are these therapies? Well, I'm sure everyone's aware, we're well aware of thinking that the three important but standard ways that cancer is treated, we've got surgery, radiation therapy, and chemo therapy.

And they remain, let me stress, as important as before. They're improving all the time, there are advances being made continually.

But learning how to use the patient's own immune system to fight their cancer is really special. In fact, it's the first radically different way of treating cancer bar none that's come along in well over 50 years. Now, it's not all our work Lisa (inaudible) but that's the level of excitement we are generating.

So let me stress as well, this isn't something off into the future, this is something, it's really a revolution in cancer care that's happening now.

Over the past five years or so, there've been thousands of examples around the world in cancer patients in clinical trials in many diseases, in melanoma, lung cancer, leukaemia, lymphoma, breast cancer and several others.

Patients who really were in very difficult clinical situations where they're outlook was grim. And not only have those people recovered and gone into prolonged remissions but they are living full and meaningful, and very, very productive lives.

So, Minister, we're still learning and an extra five years of funding is like gold to us in terms of what we can (inaudible).

There's still lots to do, we have to work out how to combine these therapies with existing ones and make them work better together.

But, you know, when we hear from Jim and Kerry I think it will probably come through as how these therapies are actually saving lives here and now and just inspiring us all even more to do more into the future.

So this World Cancer Day 2017, we dare to believe that someday, not too far away, the human suffering that's caused by cancer may be controlled, if not eradicated completely. Maybe that's a bridge too far for now.

But if cancer control is on its way and we have cancer on the run. So, Minister, I'll leave it there. We look forward very, very much to the next five years and beyond.

We're very, very keen to make the VCCC work harmoniously, collaboratively, (inaudible) to work with our partners here and across the country and indeed around the world.

And of course we're delighted at the Federal Government's vision to bring on new funding streams like the Medical Research Future Fund which will, I hope, I'm sure, make major differences in moving those basic research discoveries right into the clinical space.

Because I think we have wonderful opportunities and facilities like and many many others around the country. So, Minister, thank you very, very much again and we really appreciate your support.

**GREG HUNT:**

It's a real pleasure, happy to take any questions.

**JOURNALIST:**

Donald Trump as President continues to be a saga. Are you able to confirm there's some sense that US authorities, US officials may well have called off the vetting of these refugees on Nauru and Manus. Are you in a position to comment on that?

**GREG HUNT:**

No, I'll leave those for the Prime Minister and the ministers who are involved. What I would say is this that when you know Malcolm Turnbull, you know somebody who stands up for Australia with an absolute resolution, a complete focus, but a gentle deft touch through diplomacy.

**JOURNALIST:**

On a more broader scale. Should Australians be concerned about the alliance between America and Australia at the moment?

**GREG HUNT:**

I don't think the alliance could be stronger than it is. It's a fundamental part of Australia's relationship, not just with the United States, but with the region, and it's a fundamental part of the US's relationship with the world.

And I actually think we've seen very strong evidence of that with the words of President Trump himself in the last 24 hours.

**JOURNALIST:**

But we've already seen though, previous reports which contradicted previous reports. It's certainly not a particularly consistent message though is it?

**GREG HUNT:**

Oh I think the relationship is strong, enduring and powerful and that's been confirmed at the highest levels of the United States in the last 24 hours.

**JOURNALIST:**

If this is true, that US officials have called off the vetting, what would that signal?

**GREG HUNT:**

I'll leave that for others who are involved in the process.

**JOURNALIST:**

What about today there is talk that there are some backbenchers trying to push a free vote on same sex marriage as early as March?

**GREG HUNT:**

I hadn't heard that and I'll leave that for the Attorney-General and others involved there.

**JOURNALIST:**

How would you vote in a free vote?

**GREG HUNT:**

Look, it's not something I've heard about so it's not something I'll walk into.

I'm here at VCCC and Peter Mac to talk about cancer, and the magnificent work on immunology and immunotherapy which Joe Trapani and his team are doing.

Alright. Thank you very much.

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