

Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Men's Health from: The Victorian Prostate Cancer Research Consortium (VPCRC)

The Victorian Prostate Cancer Research Consortium (VPCRC) was incorporated in 2008, supported by funding from the Department of Human Services, which was promised for three years in the first instance. It was modelled on the Victorian Breast Cancer Research Consortium (VBCRC) which has been funded by the Victorian Government since 1997.

Background

Prostate cancer is the commonest male cancer, affecting one in seven men in Australia. In 2007 there were 18,000 new diagnoses of prostate cancer and 3,500 deaths from prostate cancer in this country. It is anticipated that with the ageing of our population there will be a doubling in the diagnosis of prostate cancer by the year 2020.

Prostate cancer presents significant challenges to the clinicians undertaking its treatment. There is currently no satisfactory non-invasive diagnostic test for prostate cancer, with the commonly used Prostate Specific Antigen (PSA) test lacking the specificity and sensitivity for this role. The anatomic location of the prostate makes direct recognition of cancer difficult, and current radiographic imaging techniques are of minimal utility to improve detection rates.

Prostate cancers have markedly variable biology, with some being almost completely indolent (and hence requiring no therapy) while others are rapidly invasive or metastatic (spread to other tissues or organs) and a real threat to life. A current short-fall in clinical medicine is tests which will discriminate between these quite different forms of prostate cancer. Such markers would also be useful for monitoring disease progression and developing new treatments.

Prostate cancer may respond initially to treatment with hormone ablation (chemical castration which causes multiple adverse effects) but in most prostate cancers the response is only temporary and the cancer then continues to proliferate and spread.

The solution to these and other challenges in the management of prostate cancer will come from basic laboratory research at a cellular and molecular level, with translation of laboratory discoveries into clinical practice. Prostate cancer patients and their families understand that research is the key to improving treatment for this major Men's Health problem.

Role of the VPCRC

The VPCRC is a dedicated research based consortium that aims to increase the level of research into understanding the fundamental mechanisms underlying prostate cancer development and contributing to treatment resistance. The aim of the consortium is to establish vibrant and meaningful research collaborations between nodes able to link biomedical and clinical research, and to span the diagnostic and therapeutic development spectrum, without investing in physical infrastructure or capital development.

The VPCRC consortium members encompass surgical, oncological, radiological, and pathological prostate cancer treatment and diagnostic services as well as basic prostate cancer research. The consortium operates as an 'institute without walls' with its research groups

located amongst the collaborating institutions: The Royal Melbourne Hospital, The University of Melbourne, The Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research, Monash University, The Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and TissuPath Pty Ltd. Close links will also be developed with Epworth Hospital and the Epworth Prostate Cancer Research Centre.

The VPCRC facilitates these linkages by engaging closely with researchers and providing support for grant applications to Victorian based and national research grant bodies. In addition, the VPCRC acts as a vehicle for funding derived from government and other research funding bodies, as well as from philanthropic sources. It is the level of engagement with researchers in a consortium based arrangement that distinguishes VPCRC from other funding bodies.

The driving force behind establishment of the VPCRC was Professor Anthony Costello, Professor of Urology at the University of Melbourne and Director of the Epworth Prostate Cancer Research Centre. The CEO, Soula Ganiatsas, has a strong background in science and cancer research management, and so is well qualified to engage directly with researchers and to assist with scientific meetings on prostate cancer research and with grant applications.

Relationship with other prostate cancer organisations

Based on individual relationships, the VPCRC has strong links with the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia (PCFA), the peak consumer body for prostate cancer issues in Australia. The PCFA represents all prostate cancer support/advocacy groups in Australia. Professor John Mills, who leads the Consortium Member Group of TissuPath Pty Ltd, is the Chairman of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia. The formation of the VPCRC has the full backing of the PCFA.

Because of its close engagement with researchers in the field of prostate cancer, VPCRC is able to provide a link between researchers and the public who want to support research into this major cancer affecting men. VPCRC aims to work closely with PCFA in support of prostate cancer research.

Purpose of submission

VPCRC is encouraged by the focus on men's health provided by the Senate Select Committee and wishes to make the Senate aware of this Victorian initiative in the important field of prostate cancer. Further information can be obtained from the VPCRC website:

www.vpcrc.org.au

Professor James Best on behalf of the Board and CEO of VPCRC

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