PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
MACFARLANE BURNET CENTRE FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH
MELBOURNE - 30 SEPTEMBER 1987

Mr Brian Naylor, Master of Ceremonies
Professor Ian Gust, Director of the Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research
Ladies and gentlemen

For nearly four decades, Fairfield Hospital has devoted itself to the care of patients suffering infectious diseases and to the conduct of research into the causes and cures of those diseases.

Its work in these fields has been of such consistent excellence that Fairfield Hospital has established itself as one of Melbourne's household names, one of Australia's great institutions and - it can be said without any hyperbole - one of the world's preeminent centres for the expansion of medical knowledge

The presence of so many distinguished guests here this morning testifies to the widespread recognition of Fairfield Hospital's work and to the tremendous community goodwill it has built over the years.

The Breakthrough Appeal 1987, which it is my pleasure to launch today, aims to open a new chapter in the research capability of this institution by equipping the Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research for breakthroughs in the understanding and treatment of viruses.

Viruses are responsible for more than 70 per cent of all illnesses and cause a tremendous range of disease.

Encephalitis, meningitis, pneumonia, measles and rubella: even that incomplete list illustrates the profound, sometimes fatal, implications of viruses. They are the major cause of death in developing countries. Today the AIDS virus - or to give it its correct name the human immuno deficiency virus - presents new, and worrying, and still unsolved problems for all of us, in all countries.

In 1950, a small virology laboratory was established at Fairfield Hospital to study clinical virology and the epidemiology of the virus diseases of man.

This initiative was taken by Australia's most distinguished scientist, the father of modern virology, the 1960 Nobel Prize Winner, Sir Macfarlane Burnet. Among all his other activities, Sir Macfarlane served Fairfield Hospital as honorary consultant epidemiologist and immunologist from 1947 till his death in 1985.

He inspired generations of medical scientists not only to scientific research, but to the dissemination of the fruits of their learning and their discoveries to all Australians.

The virology laboratory has since established an international reputation for its work on respiratory infections, rubella, gastroenteritis, hepatitis and AIDS. It is one of only three World Health Organisation centres for virus reference and research, for biosafety, and for AIDS.

Through the Australian Medical Research and Development Corporation, it has developed diagnostic tests which are now being produced as commercial reagents and is collaborating with the National Institutes of Health in USA in testing the hepatitis A virus, which also has commercial applications.

The virology laboratory is also sharing the fruits of its work with less developed countries. It has converted the hepatitis B vaccine from an expensive drug into a consumer item which can now be made more readily available to the world's 250 million chronic hepatitis B carriers of whom, at present, one million die annually.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In listing these achievements, it is essential to acknowledge the visionary leadership and dedication to research excellence of Professor Ian Gust.

His work places him in the direct tradition of his predecessor Sir Macfarlane Burnet.

But this is not the occasion for complacent resting on laurels. For Fairfield Hospital now stands at the cross roads of opportunity for contributing to major new breakthroughs in the treatment of viruses.

I say this because the last decade has seen the beginning of a new era in the fields of molecular biology and immunology. The study of virus diseases has made dramatic progress, leading to a greater understanding of the ways in which viruses produce disease and ways in which they may be controlled.

Remarkable advances in the production of antiviral drugs have provided physicians with new weapons for treating some virus infections, while advances in molecular biology have led to several new approaches to immunisation.

Virology is thus the most exciting and rapidly growing area of medical science and is poised for breakthroughs in research which could dramatically improve the health of millions of people.

It was to help Fairfield's research effort play a full part in these developments that Sir Macfarlane Burnet agreed, before his death, to be founding patron of a new Medical Research Centre here.

It was completely fitting that, after his death, it was decided with the approval of his widow, Lady Burnet, that the new centre bear his name.

So in April last year, my colleague, the then Minister for Health Neal Blewett, opened the Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research.

And today it is my pleasure, as Honorary Chief Patron, to launch the fundraising appeal to accelerate this Centre's research effort.

The Appeal has two stages.

The first is to create an endowment fund which will enable the establishment of four new research groups concerned with

- pathogenesis - the process by which viruses produce disease;
- epidemiology - the study of patterns of infection;
- diagnosis, and
- prevention of virus diseases.

The longer term aim is to build a new wing onto the existing virus laboratory to provide additional work space for the research groups, and offices and laboratories for visiting scientists and graduate students.

By Easter next year, the Appeal hopes to have raised $2 million for the first phase. The second stage aims to raise another $5 million and to complete planning by the end of 1990 so construction can begin the following year. By 1995, the Centre will be sufficiently well equipped to be the most important centre for the study of virus diseases in the Western Pacific region.

Ladies and gentlemen

This Appeal takes place in the context of the fundamental economic reconstruction which Australia is undergoing.

This reconstruction seeks to place Australia on a more competitive footing - reducing our reliance on our traditional primary commodity exports, increasing our international competitiveness and productivity, boosting our capacity to produce innovative manufactures and services for export to the world and - as an integral part of all that - to boost our capacity to conduct research of world standard.

Private companies must play a leading role in the research effort - and the Government is doing what it can through grants and tax concessions to encourage them in this direction.

The CSIRO has also made an enormous contribution to Australia's economic development through its research over its 61 year history.

The Government is also establishing the Australian Research Council, which will play a major role in funding research, and which will help the nation formulate the right priorities for research. It will support both basic and applied research, and will improve cooperation between research conducted by universities, industry and Government.

In medical research, government funding has also been crucial in enabling Australian researchers to achieve an international reputation for excellence. This Government has shown its commitment to medical research by increasing the annual allocation for research supported by the National Health and Medical Research Council by more than 100% since it came to office.

Since 1971 the virology unit at Fairfield Hospital has received more than $1 million from the NHMRC. It has also been the focal point for the NHMRC funding on AIDS virology. This latter work has made Professor Gust an especially valued member of the National AIDS Task Force which provides medical and scientific advice to all Australian Governments.

The Government has every reason to be proud of its record in lifting Australia's research capacity.

But it is not a job which the public sector can do alone or should be called upon to do alone.

Private companies must increase their own R & D effort and they must also play a part in supporting the national research endeavour, including medical research. The rewards lie in the creation not only of a healthier society but, through innovations, exports, employment, and other means, the creation of a more prosperous one.

Private sponsorship of medical research in Australia is still much less than in other leading medical research countries.

There are however welcome signs of change.

Private sector donors will be contributing nearly $10 million to the Murdoch Institute for Research into Birth Defects which I launched at the beginning of this year.

Your own Breakthrough Appeal 1987 is equally deserving of widespread private sector support.

I wholeheartedly commend the Appeal and at this point I want to congratulate the Chairman of the Appeal, Richard Pratt, who has himself donated $100,000.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This Centre has a great potential for improving the lives of every one of us. There is an energy and a creativity in this Centre which is capable of producing phenomenal results.

Ian Gust and Richard Pratt have thrown down a challenge to all Australians. I have great pleasure in launching the Breakthrough Appeal 1987 and urge Australians to give the Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research their full support.

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