Chairman’s message

The Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre (VCCC) Business Case 2014–19, describing a world-class program between and within VCCC member organisations, has been developed on behalf of members, approved by the VCCC Board and submitted to the state government.

The program builds on the success of the integrated, multidisciplinary comprehensive cancer centre model, and achievements of the members and the development of the VCCC program so far. It also addresses the challenges that lie ahead, such as:

- a projected 30% rise in cancer cases in the next decade; the associated increased deaths and costs will result in larger impacts on the community and economy
- the inadequate capability to translate cancer research into clinical practice rapidly, which is inhibiting breakthroughs to control and cure cancer
- the variations in the application of evidence-based practice and suboptimal data quality, which are resulting in inconsistent outcomes and poor patient survival
- the inadequate cancer education and training, which is contributing to a skill shortage within Victoria. The Victorian system is currently unable to meet the demands of future cancer control.

The VCCC Expert Advisory Panel (EAP) — Dr Edward Trimble (National Cancer Institute [NCI]), Dr Linda Weiss (NCI CCC program), Dr Michael Sherar (Cancer Care Ontario) and Professor Stanley Kaye (Cancer Research UK/Royal Marsden) — have reviewed and commented on the business case, as has the VCCC Board. Prof Peter Selby, architect of the National Clinical Research Network (Professor of Cancer Medicine, University of Leeds) has also reviewed the proposal. The VCCC has developed a new communications strategy to support the business case.

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The VCCC has also established a series of key principles to guide how we refer to the VCCC, and how our collaborating members refer to each other and the collaboration. The overlying principle is to capitalise on our relative strengths and promote each other completely. An obvious need is to communicate achievements internally within VCCC member organisations.

The Board welcomes new member Prof Steven Smith, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at The University of Melbourne. Prof Smith’s reputation for innovation and success in the integration of health research, teaching and clinical practice, and his contributions to improved patient care will be a huge asset to the VCCC.

Executive Director’s report

The VCCC Business Case describes a multidisciplinary, multisite cancer program characterised by member institutions dedicated to work together to accelerate the control and cure of cancer. Support for the business case will enable VCCC members to improve patient care and save lives more effectively by:

- improving patient access to experimental cancer treatments in clinical trials
- expanding partnerships with research funders, industry and philanthropy
- developing joint research priorities and multidisciplinary, multisite research programs
- developing strategies for the timely evaluation and dissemination of new evidence into practice
- establishing centralised facilitation of grant applications, ethics and research governance
- developing general practice programs on prevention, risk assessment, referral pathways and shared care
- advancing public awareness, prevention and outreach programs
- establishing professionally led multidisciplinary tumour streams
- adopting and disseminating the world’s best cancer treatment protocols
- establishing a robust clinical auditing, reporting, costing and feedback system
- developing cancer-specific tertiary courses and professional development programs
- developing centralised support services to facilitate accessibility and delivery of education programs.

Mr Nathan Smythe, First Assistant Secretary, Population Health, Australian Government Department of Health; Professor Jim Bishop, Executive Director, VCCC; Mrs Kirilly Dutton, wife of the Australian Government Minister for Health; Professor Ian Olver, Chief Executive Officer, Cancer Council Australia, at the Pink Ribbon Breakfast in Sydney.
VCCC Cancer Patient Experience Survey 2012–13

Cancer patients from VCCC member clinical sites — Melbourne Health, The Royal Women’s Hospital (the Women’s), Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre (Peter Mac), Western Health and St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne — have contributed to the first CPES, which established a baseline for future analysis. The survey provides key insights into the care experienced by patients and will be used to drive quality-improvement initiatives and better models of clinical care. This quality assurance activity is part of the VCCC’s commitment to reduce the burden of cancer and ensure patient needs are met.

Between October 2012 and March 2013, 2101 patients took part in the CPES. An aggregate report of the survey findings has been compiled, and is accompanied by individual hospital-level reports. Comprehensive benchmarking analysis will be done for both the VCCC and hospital-level data against the United Kingdom’s 70 000 patients who were surveyed using the same questionnaire. The individual hospital reports will be provided to each hospital in the coming months for clinicians and managers to review.

The VCCC wishes to thank the members of the working group who supported the survey process within their hospitals. We also thank the patients who took the time to complete and return this valuable questionnaire.

Key CPES findings

- Around 91% of respondents rated their overall care as excellent or very good.
- Nearly 90% of patients felt they were treated with respect and dignity by the doctors and nurses treating them.
- 89% of inpatients and 84% of day-case patients felt everything possible was done to control their pain.
- 81% of patients felt they were given sufficient information about support or self-help groups, but less than 70% of patients were able to discuss their worries or fears with staff as much as they wanted to.
- Less than 60% of patients were given written information about the type of cancer they had, and less than 70% completely understood the explanation of what was wrong with them.
- About 50% of patients were asked whether they would like to take part in cancer research. This compares favourably to UK patients, of whom only about 30% reported being asked the same question.
- For the vast majority of measures, the results across different member hospitals were consistent.
Seven priority areas for clinical trials

The VCCC research censuses have provided valuable opportunities for researchers to identify areas of need. The past two censuses have highlighted clinical trials as needing better ‘support and infrastructure’. A working group was therefore established to determine exactly what researchers meant by support and infrastructure, and to address the challenges in running clinical trials — in particular, Phase I trials.

In June, the VCCC Board endorsed seven priorities that the working group recommended, and further development for each priority is planned. Cancer Trials Australia (CTA) has already started addressing priorities, under the auspices of the VCCC. The Independent Hospital Pricing Authority (IHPA) has also completed a consultation on standard clinical trials costs.

For more information, please contact Rebecca Lennon at rlennon@unimelb.edu.au or 03 9035 4677.

Ovarian Cancer Symposium success

Victorian Minister for Health, The Hon. David Davis, MLC, opened the VCCC Gynaecological Oncology Research Collaborative’s second Ovarian Cancer Symposium on 5 August. In his opening remarks, the minister talked about the importance of fusing research with clinical activity across the VCCC to attain world-leading cancer care provision.

Associate Professor Clare Scott — an ovarian cancer researcher at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, and a cancer specialist at the Royal Melbourne and Royal Women’s hospitals — chaired the organising committee. The meeting focused on promoting the latest advances in treatments and detection in ovarian cancer research. This will enable multidisciplinary cancer-treating teams to deliver the highest standard of care to patients.

In addition to a very moving opening speech by Mr Duncan McPherson (consumer and Women’s Cancer Foundation Board member), the program featured international keynote presentations from Prof Michael Bookman (US), Assoc Prof Ronny Drapkin (US) and Prof Amit Oza (Canada), and an interactive videoconference with Prof Elizabeth Swisher, University of Washington.

The VCCC ovarian cancer symposiums are attracting a growing number of medical professionals and researchers, locally and nationally. This year, 160 cancer specialists attended over the three days, representing approximately 50 organisations.
Leaders in Cancer Strategy

Inaugural Metcalf Chair to champion leukaemia research

Prof Andrew Roberts’ appointment as the inaugural Metcalf Chair of Leukaemia Research is part of the VCCC’s Leaders in Cancer Strategy, which aims to create new academic leadership. The joint appointment celebrates a longstanding collaboration in leukaemia research between The University of Melbourne, the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute and The Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Prof Roberts is a distinguished cancer researcher, and is leading world-first clinical trials of new anticancer agents to treat acute myeloid leukaemia, chronic lymphocytic leukaemia and lymphoma. He is currently a cancer researcher and head of clinical translation at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, and a clinical haematologist at The Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Prof Roberts is honoured to be the inaugural Metcalf Chair, through which he will champion fundamental and translational leukaemia research in Melbourne. He and his team are aiming to make major improvements in the diagnosis and treatment of leukaemia and related cancers of the blood.

‘Leukaemia is a devastating disease, and we desperately need to find new approaches to its treatment’, Prof Roberts explained. ‘This investment by VCCC member organisations will accelerate the research that is essential to finding curative solutions for patients with blood cancers.’

VCCC Executive Director Prof Jim Bishop added, ‘The appointment of such a high-calibre person in this role will pave the way for the sort of innovation that is at the heart of the VCCC’s mission — to more rapidly translate basic research into clinical practice’.

The Metcalf Chair is named in honour of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute cancer researcher Prof Don Metcalf, who discovered colony-stimulating factors (CSFs) in collaboration with Prof Ray Bradley, Department of Physiology, The University of Melbourne, and Prof Richard Fox, The Royal Melbourne Hospital. CSFs are cell-signalling hormones that drive the production of infection-fighting white blood cells.

Members’ awards

Several individuals from VCCC member organisations have recently been honoured for their outstanding achievements.

Prof Terry Speed wins Prime Minister’s top prize

Prof Terry Speed from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute has received the Prime Minister’s Prize for Science. The award was presented to Prof Speed at a ceremony at Parliament House. It is Australia’s highest award for excellence in science research, and has been awarded to Prof Speed in recognition of his influential work using mathematics and statistics to help biologists understand human health and disease. During his 44-year career, Prof Speed has developed mathematical and statistical tools that enable biologists to make sense of the vast amounts of information generated by next-generation genetic technologies, which are advancing rapidly. In addition, he is working with biologists to identify the genetic traits that make normal and cancerous cells different, and developing tools to determine if thyroid growths are benign or cancerous. He is also involved in The Cancer Genome Atlas project, an international collaboration that is identifying the genetic changes responsible for more than 20 types of cancer, to develop new diagnostics and treatments.

Prof Doug Hilton wins the Ramaciotti Medal

Prof Douglas Hilton, blood cell researcher, Director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute and VCCC Board member, has been awarded the 2013 Ramaciotti Medal for Excellence in Biomedical Research. Prof Hilton is a renowned leader in cell signalling and blood research, making a number of discoveries that have changed the way we view blood cell production and development in the body. Prof Hilton’s research is now focused on identifying the genes, molecular pathways and signals involved in blood cell formation and production, from early blood stem cells through to fully mature blood cells.

Prof Jon Emery wins Bridges–Webb Medal and best paper of the year prize

Prof Jon Emery, Chair of Primary Care Cancer Research at the VCCC, has received the 2013 Australian Association for Academic Primary Care (AAAPC) Bridges–Webb Medal. This award recognises AAAPC members who have made — and will continue to make — international standard teaching and/or research contributions to academic activities in the general practice environment. Prof Emery has also received the Royal College of General Practitioners prize for best paper of the year in the cancer category.
PhD experience survey results to lead program development

The impetus for the recent VCCC PhD student experience survey was to gather evidence to form a base for the guidance and development of programs that will retain and recruit the best of the best across the member organisations. According to the VCCC Research Census, there are 202 University of Melbourne PhD students (119 nonclinical, 83 clinical) undertaking research training in VCCC member research institutes and hospitals.

The PhD student experience survey was designed to establish a comprehensive picture of PhD researchers’ experiences. The first phase was a qualitative study involving both clinical and nonclinical students, representing all VCCC members. Themes identified in this first phase were:

• the importance of an effective supervisory relationship
• the desire for customised, relevant, timely and accessible support activities
• a greater need for intellectual integration and value in the research community
• the variety of motivations underlying students’ decisions to undertake a PhD
• acknowledgment that peers within the lab are the chief means of support
• the high regard for formal and informal mentoring programs.

Financial constraints were frequently reported as a major source of stress for students, particularly those who are comparatively young and study full-time.

A quantitative survey has now been used to confirm the qualitative results. The final report will be used to identify key areas of need, and to influence the design and development of activities to support and enrich research training in the VCCC.

IM & ICT team progress

The information management and information and communications technology (IM & ICT) team, from the Project Management Team, continues to ensure the building is ICT-ready. An overall program of work is being established in consultation with the building ICT team and VCCC building partners. Workshops will soon commence with user groups to understand the requirements for access, security and technology, such as bedside terminals, networks and desktop PCs. To keep VCCC members up to date on all aspects of the IM & ICT program of work, a SharePoint site will go live in December 2013.

A request for tender was released through Peter Mac in October for an Animal Facility Management solution. The tender is expected to close in December 2013.

The Conexus major tender continues, with a proof of concept and site visits for the short-listed consortia. Proof-of-concept presentations are anticipated to start in November.

Personalised Medicine Program

VCCC Molecular Tumour Board

The newly established VCCC Molecular Tumour Board (MTB) provides a forum for clinicians and scientists to come together to examine and discuss patients’ genomic test results and how these results may influence clinical care. The monthly meeting is held in a multidisciplinary meeting style and is attended by both clinical and scientific representatives from all eight VCCC member organisations. In addition to promoting best clinical practice, the MTB provides a valuable opportunity for clinicians and scientists to interact and learn from one another.

The MTB is proving to be a great success, and the first four meetings saw a diverse range of cases presented and discussed. The Peter Mac Whole Exome Sequencing Feasibility Study, and the Molecular Profiling and Therapeutic Approaches for Carcinoma of Unknown Primary, and Variant Management System projects have also been showcased.

To improve clinical practice and learning excellence, cases will be followed up a few months after their initial presentation. In addition, a database of MTB members and their expertise has been established. Once case studies have been submitted for presentation at a meeting, the database can be used to identify members with expertise in areas relevant to the cases being presented, ensuring the most appropriate clinicians and researchers are in attendance.

For more information on the MTB, please contact Fiona Macken at fiona.macken@unimelb.edu.au.
VCCC Project update

Street level reached!

On 4 October, The Hon. David Davis, MLC, Minister for Health (Victoria), visited the VCCC Project construction site to celebrate the ‘breaking of street level’. This milestone marks the completion of the facility’s six basement levels. Minister Davis said, ‘The last time I visited the site, in March this year, excavation was complete with an enormous 300,000 cubic metres of dirt coming out of the ground and the first concrete pours for the basement were taking place. Just seven months later, this facility has reached ground level and the building structure is one-third complete.’

Now that street level has been reached, works will focus on the facility’s 13 above-ground levels. Passers-by will then see the facility start to take shape. Construction progress can also be viewed on the project webcam at vcccproject.vic.gov.au/Webcam.

The vision for the VCCC is to save lives through the integration of cancer research, education and patient care. Through innovation and collaboration, the VCCC will drive the next generation of improvements in prevention, detection and cancer treatment.