

Humans of Medical Research

MEET PROF PHIL HANSBRO

As an internationally renowned researcher focused on chronic respiratory diseases and the immune system, Professor Phil Hansbro was quick to turn his talents to tackling COVID-19 and the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

“COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that in particularly severe cases overloads the immune system. The virus can cause an excessive inflammatory response which damages cells and tissues, and this can ultimately lead to respiratory failure and death,” he says.

At Centenary, Phil is Deputy Director. He also heads up the Centenary UTS Centre for Inflammation which is dedicated to studying the mechanisms that underpin inflammation to understand how major diseases develop and progress.

Over the last three months Phil has been busy establishing a new COVID-19 laboratory. He is dedicated to understanding the mechanics underlying SARS-CoV-2 and how it induces COVID-19 disease.

“Our goal is to identify or develop new effective COVID-19 treatments that are able to reduce this ‘inflammatory storm’ in susceptible individuals, ultimately to save lives,” he says.



Outside of the laboratory Phil is an avid birdwatcher. Fascinated by birds since he was a child, he’s observed them all around the world.

“I’ve been into birdwatching for as long as I can remember. I’ve got notes in one of my very oldest bird books, from when I was seven. None of my friends or family were interested but for some reason birds

have always captured my attention,” he says.

There are approximately 10,000 different species of birds and Phil has managed to tick-off 7,256 of them over the course of his lifetime. There are only four bird species in Australia that he has yet to observe in the wild.

“Birdwatching is the only time in my life when I’m not thinking about my work. It helps me to recharge my batteries and takes me to places I would never normally go to,” he says.

Phil is particularly interested in seabirds and enjoys travelling to remote islands.

“A highlight was visiting the sub-Antarctic Kerguelen Islands where I was fortunate to view vast numbers of petrels, terns, albatrosses and penguins,” he says.

Phil’s passion for birds has also managed to lend itself to his research.

“I was involved in setting up the Australian surveillance program for bird flu and other avian viruses back in 2006 and it continues to operate in NSW to this day. In a curious twist, my fascination with birds has become both personal and professional,” says Phil.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

CANCER

Cancer is a disease of the cells, which are the body’s basic building blocks.

1 in 2 Australians will be diagnosed with cancer by the age of 85.

INFLAMMATION

Inflammation is the body’s natural response to protect itself against harm. There are two types: acute and chronic.

1 in 9 Australians have asthma, around 2.5 million people.

CARDIOVASCULAR

Cardiovascular Disease (CVD) is a collective term for diseases of the heart and blood vessels.

Almost 1 in 3 deaths in Australia are due to cardiovascular disease.