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## Three researchers recognised for their contributions to Australian medical research

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Three top Walter and Eliza Hall Institute researchers have been recognised for their contributions to Australian medical research, with their election as fellows of the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (AAHMS).

Professor Nick Nicola, Professor Warren Alexander and Professor David Vaux were appointed new fellows of the AAHMS at a ceremony in Canberra. The academy promotes medical research and its translation to enable a healthier community both in Australia and globally. Fellows are elected for outstanding leadership and distinguished professional achievement in their field.

Deputy director of the institute Professor Vaux has made significant contributions to cancer research -- in particular, how cells kill themselves, and how this process can be activated to treat cancers.

In 1988 Professor Vaux and his colleagues made a discovery that launched the molecular era of cell death research. The discovery began a 25-year research program that has led to the development of an anti-cancer drug that is now in phase 3 clinical trials in Melbourne and worldwide.

"We now know that -- in addition to unregulated growth -- cancers can also arise when cells lose the ability to kill themselves. And we have continued to learn more about the complex signalling pathways that govern cell life and death, which we hope will lead to other disease treatments, not just for cancer but also perhaps for autoimmune and infectious diseases," said Professor Vaux.

Blood cell researchers Professor Nicola and Professor Alexander, joint heads of the institute's Cancer and Haematology division, have made significant contributions to our understanding of blood stem cells, blood cell production and disease.

Professor Nicola was part of the team that discovered colony stimulating factors (CSFs) -- hormones that stimulate the body to make life-saving cells that protect against infection. The discovery has helped more than 20 million people recover from chemotherapy and revolutionised blood stem cell transplants.

His research continues to focus on how cell signalling is controlled in the immune system, identifying new therapeutic targets for treating serious blood diseases such as polycythemia vera and essential thrombocytopenia.

Professor Alexander leads a team researching blood stem cells and how blood cells form -- in particular, how defects in blood cell production can lead to diseases such as leukaemia. A recent breakthrough by his team solved a puzzle about how blood-clotting cells called platelets are produced.

"The body must carefully control platelet production -- too few can lead to uncontrolled bleeding, while too many may cause inappropriate clotting and the risk of thrombosis or stroke," said Professor Alexander.

Institute director Professor Doug Hilton acknowledged the dedication of the new fellows to making fundamental discoveries with human health applications.

"Nick, Dave and Warren have all made an incredibly important discoveries, several of which have very significantly changed clinical practice and improved human health worldwide," he said. "It's wonderful to see them recognised for their work. The academy is important to the sector as it provides an invaluable forum for discussion on the progress of medical research with an emphasis on translation of research into practice, which of course is our ultimate goal as biomedical scientists," said Professor Hilton.

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Source:

Walter and Eliza Hall Institute

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