

## **Macular Degeneration Foundation awards inaugural research grants to combat Australia's leading cause of blindness**

The prevalence of Macular Degeneration, the leading cause of blindness in Australia, is set to rise 70 percent to 1.7 million in the next 20 years, a Deloitte Access Economics Report commissioned by the Macular Degeneration Foundation has revealed.

Macular Degeneration is the leading cause of blindness and major vision loss in Australia. It has four times the prevalence of dementia and more than half that of diabetes. It is a serious chronic disease.

By 2030, the number of those with late stage disease (vision loss or blindness) could double from 167,000 to 330,000; in the absence of treatment and prevention efforts.

In 2010, the total economic cost of vision loss associated with Age-related Macular Degeneration was in excess of \$5 billion.

To combat this devastating chronic disease, that is taking away the sight of so many Australians, the Macular Degeneration Foundation is investing in major research to find reasons and answers so that all Australians can see a future.

The inaugural Macular Degeneration Foundation Research Grants Program has, on World Sight Day, awarded pre-eminent world leading researchers nearly three-quarters of a million dollars to support crucial research to shed light on prevention and early detection in order to save the sight of many Australians.

The recipients of the major grants are:

**Professor Paul Mitchell** Director Centre for Vision Research Westmead Millennium Institute  
The University of Sydney

**Professor Robyn Guymer** Deputy Director Centre for Eye Research Australia  
University of Melbourne

In addition, the Blackmores Dr Paul Beaumont Fellowship awarded to:

**Dr Liubov Robman** Senior Research Fellow Centre for Eye Research Australia  
University of Melbourne

“Research provides hope,” said Professor Paul Mitchell. “The advancement of our knowledge of Macular Degeneration through research will help us develop more targeted preventative strategies. If people know they have early signs, they can make a change.”

Announcing the grant winners at Admiralty House in Sydney today, Governor-General of Australia, Ms Quentin Bryce AC said, “The work of the Macular Degeneration Foundation is critical in raising public awareness of Macular Degeneration and slowing its prevalence. The Macular Degeneration Foundation, a charity, relies on much community support in spreading the message.

“It has achieved mighty outcomes during its short existence and Australia is now a world leader in public awareness of macular degeneration,” she said.

Coinciding with the Foundation’s research announcement is the launch of a Deloitte Access Economics Report commissioned by the Macular Degeneration Foundation which provides the most current, comprehensive compilation of Macular Degeneration statistics and latest research ever undertaken in Australia.

Macular Degeneration Foundation CEO, Ms Julie Heraghty said, “This report on Macular Degeneration reinforces the need for greater investment in research. Macular Degeneration affects one in seven Australians over 50 in some way. It is responsible for 50% of all blindness; more than glaucoma and cataracts combined.

“The Macular Degeneration landscape has changed significantly over the past decade; primarily with dramatic improvement in treatment and new insights into the role of diet and genetic factors. These advances were only possible thanks to research.

“This report complements our significant initial research commitment of nearly three-quarters of a million dollars. We know research works and sooner or later we will find a cure through research,” said Heraghty.

**Report key findings:**

- In 2010, approximately 1 million Australians over 50 years had some evidence of MD
- This number will rise by over 70% to 1.7 million in the next 20 years
- Approximately 17% of these people with MD could potentially lose vision in the absence of treatment and prevention efforts
- By 2030, the number of those with late stage disease (vision loss) could double from 167,000 to 330,000; in the absence of treatment and prevention efforts
- Prevention and treatment includes early detection, uptake of treatment, adoption of eye health diet and lifestyle behaviours and smoking cessation
- In relation to Age-related Macular Degeneration, a saving of approximately \$247 million per year could be made if cigarette smoking was halved
- In 2010, the total economic cost of vision loss associated with Age-related Macular Degeneration was in excess of \$5 billion. This includes health system costs, other financial costs and loss of wellbeing
- For every \$1 invested in the current treatment for wet Age-related Macular Degeneration, there has been a \$2 saving in social benefit costs

**ENDS**

Issued on behalf of the Macular Degeneration Foundation by Porter Novelli

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**About the Macular Degeneration Foundation**

The Macular Degeneration Foundation is a charity that is committed to reducing the incidence and impact of Macular Degeneration in Australia. The Foundation achieves this through awareness, education, research, support services and representation. Raising awareness of the disease and its potential impacts is one of the key objectives of the Foundation.

To find out more about Macular Degeneration and to receive a free information pack, please phone the Macular Degeneration Foundation on the free call number 1800 111 709 or visit [www.mdfoundation.com.au](http://www.mdfoundation.com.au)

**About Macular Degeneration**

Macular Degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in Australia. All Australians over age 50 should have an eye test and make sure their macula is checked.

The macula is the central part of the retina, which is the light sensitive tissue at the back of the eye. The retina processes all visual images and is responsible for the ability to drive, see colours clearly, read and recognise faces. Macular Degeneration causes progressive macula damage resulting in central vision loss.

**World Sight Day - 13 October 2011**

World Sight Day is an annual day of awareness to focus global attention on blindness, visual impairment and rehabilitation of the visually impaired held on the second Thursday in October. World Sight Day is observed around the world by all partners involved in preventing visual impairment or restoring sight.