

# Cancer Trials Management Scheme Competitive Grants

Fostering innovation in cancer to save lives and ensure equitable access to clinical trials for all Victorians.



## Clinical trial projects we fund

**Project:** Regional Trial Network - Victoria

**Aim:** To increase the number of clinical trials available to regional and rural cancer patients in Victoria through collaboration.

**Grant recipient:** Dr Craig Underhill

and the Regional Trial Network - Victoria, with representation from: Barwon Health, Ballarat Regional Integrated Cancer Centre, Bendigo Cancer Centre, Border Medical Oncology Research Unit, Goulburn Valley Health, South West Healthcare and Cancer Trials Australia.

**Funded by:** Cancer Council Victoria and the Department of Health through the Victorian Cancer Agency

**Years funded:** 2017-2019

## The project

The Regional Trial Network - Victoria was created to improve access and recruitment to high-quality cancer clinical trials for rural and regional Victorians. It brought together the six regional clinical trial sites listed above. The network covers an area of 141,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and supports a population of 1.4 million, with about 7,200 cancer diagnoses each year.

## The need

While there's been a rapid increase in the number and type of cancer treatments available in clinical trials in recent years, there are concerns about how regional and rural patients will access these cutting edge treatments.

Until recently, clinical trials were almost exclusively conducted in metropolitan hospitals, and often have onerous follow-up requirements, putting them out of reach for some regional and rural patients. In that year, 393 patients from regional Victoria were recruited into clinical trials, but 343 of those people travelled to Melbourne to do so.

Low rates of trial participation may be a contributing factor to lower five-year cancer survival rates in regional Victoria. Addressing this low rate of participation may lead to an improvement in cancer outcomes.

## The impact

The Regional Trial Network - Victoria aimed to increase the number of clinical trials available to regional and rural patients, by providing centralised expertise and support to clinical trial units in regional Victoria. The network piloted telehealth technology to undertake trials activity and reduce the burden of travel for patients allowing them access to cutting-edge cancer treatments.

## The outcomes

The Regional Trial Network - Victoria developed a governance structure and framework to improve collaboration between participating regional trial units, undertook a gap analysis to identify local areas of unmet need and established relationships with key education and training providers to improve skills in the local trial units.

**Since establishing the Regional Trial Network - Victoria in 2017, there has been a 64% increase in recruiting clinical trials at participating sites and a 49% increase in recruited patients.**

The Regional Trial Network - Victoria is now a well-recognised collaboration of regional clinical trial units.

## What's next?

Following the success of this project, Border Medical Oncology Research Unit led by Dr Craig Underhill was awarded \$18.6 million from the Australian Government Medical Research Future Fund for the 'ReViTALISE' project, aimed at bridging the metro-regional trials gap by 2025. This project will, among other things, add the Mildura Base Hospital and Latrobe Regional Hospital as new sites to the Regional Trial Network - Victoria and introduce seven unique health services research programs increasing the number of available trials and improving access for patients, in regional Victoria.

“This provided us with the start-up funding we needed to demonstrate what could be done to increase clinical trial activity and collaboration in the regions. It has enabled us to apply for and be awarded a significant government grant that now allows us to extend our work and importantly hopefully save the lives of more regional Australians with cancer.” – Dr Craig Underhill