

# Melbourne Children's

A world leader in child and adolescent health



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The Royal Children's Hospital has had a relationship with the University of Melbourne, and in particular with its medical school, from the time the hospital came into being (as the Institution for Sick Children) in 1870. Both were founded in the mid-19th century, during a period of amazing growth due to Victoria's gold rush, with the capital's population reaching 200,000 in the 1870s. As Melbourne became one of the truly great cities of the world, later characterised as 'Marvellous Melbourne', its citizens and leaders sought to build foundational institutions worthy of such a status, including the University of Melbourne (1853) with its medical school (1862) and the Children's Hospital.<sup>1</sup>

Dominant in the drive to create such institutions was Sir Redmond Barry, already a founding figure in establishing the Melbourne Hospital (1848), who in 1853 became the first chancellor of the university, and whose former residence in Carlton would later become home to the rapidly growing Children's Hospital. Barry was emblematic of a procession of Melbourne citizens of influence and affluence who, over the life of the hospital, have been strong advocates and supporters of its growth and development, many also serving as powerful advocates for the University of Melbourne.

In the mid-20th century, Lady (later Dame) Elisabeth Murdoch was just such a dominant force in establishment Melbourne. She joined the Children's Hospital committee of management in 1933 and was president from 1954 to 1965. In this role she was singularly influential in convincing Premier Henry Bolte to permit the hospital to move from the city to Parkville. The need for a new site had long been discussed, and the Parkville locale was favoured by many, due at least in part to its proximity to the Melbourne Hospital and the university. However, it was the force of Elisabeth Murdoch's leadership that got the government to finally agree in 1956.

Widespread community support has always been a major factor in the life of the Children's Hospital, a huge element of which derived from the annual Good Friday Appeal, which was established in the 1930s–40s with the support of *The Herald and Weekly Times*. Indeed, it was the media in the early 21st century that helped ensure the success of the campaign by the hospital's Senior Medical Staff Association and the university's Stevenson Chair of Paediatrics to build a new, world-class Children's Hospital and keep it in the Parkville location, in Royal Park.

<sup>1</sup>Melbourne Children's: bringing together the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, the University of Melbourne Department of Paediatrics, and the Royal Children's Hospital Foundation, 2021.

Philanthropy has also always been an important feature of the relationship between the hospital and the university. A generous gift by Dame Hilda Stevenson to the university saw the establishment in 1959 of the Stevenson Chair of Child Health (later paediatrics), with the inaugural appointee being the highly esteemed Professor Vernon Collins, a leading clinician at the hospital since 1936. The link between the two institutions was strengthened by the Stevenson Professor being made a member of the hospital's board of management, an arrangement that continued until 1995.

The first formal agreement between the university and the hospital was made in 1900, when, at the request of the registrar of the university, the honorary staff of the hospital nominated renowned clinical teacher Dr William Snowball to be appointed to the Faculty of Medicine. In 1913 the Children's was listed by the university as a special hospital for clinical instruction. Although in 1940 the hospital president, Lady Ella Latham, appointed Professors John Medley and Peter MacCallum to the hospital's medical advisory board, the establishment of the Stevenson Chair as a full professorial appointment in the emerging specialty of paediatrics was a sentinel event in the relationship. In this spirit of collaboration, the combined efforts of the university and the Royal Children's Hospital Foundation in the area of philanthropy over the past two decades have led to a further six named chairs in various areas of paediatrics being established in the Melbourne Medical School and based at the hospital.

The hospital–university partnership was initially centred on the provision of the best possible clinical care to the children of Victoria, and on the training of medical students and young doctors to deliver such care. The special health needs and rights of children were emerging as essential to any compassionate and civil society and, in the pre-antibiotic era, the deaths of children from common infectious illnesses, especially diarrhoeal diseases, were significant. Research endeavours aimed at improving child health care were recognised as being part of the partnership's mission, one that expanded greatly in the second half of the 20th century. Many advances occurred thereafter, arguably none more significant than the discovery of the rotavirus, as revealed in a 1973 paper published in *The Lancet* by Dr Ruth Bishop and colleagues at the Royal Children's Hospital—a genuine example of the power of collaboration between hospital and university.

In 1985 Professor David Danks, then Stevenson Professor of Paediatrics and an internationally renowned pioneer in human genetics research, established, with the support of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, the Murdoch Institute for Birth Defects, based at the RCH. 'The Murdoch' became an international centre of excellence in clinical genetics. In 2000 it merged with the Royal Children's Hospital Research Institute to form the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), under the inaugural leadership of Professor Bob Williamson. The MCRI quickly became a global powerhouse in child and

adolescent health research, and with more than 2,000 research-committed staff is now one of the largest of its kind in the world.

Research at the hospital has always been dedicated to the health of every infant, child and adolescent in the community, as well as to the highly specialised laboratory areas for which the institution has been best known. Much of this pioneering research has been supported by generous philanthropy, particularly the Good Friday Appeal and the Royal Children's Hospital Foundation, both of which have seen research as core to their respective missions from inception. The hospital, the university and the institute now form an integrated health and medical research entity in partnership with the foundation, all located on the world-class Melbourne Children's Campus in Parkville.

The generative power of collaboration and partnership in a university–hospital precinct that has developed over 150 years has made a genuine contribution to the health of children and young people locally, nationally and globally. The resulting community advocacy, visionary leadership and support through philanthropy have been critical factors in this 150-year history, and will no doubt be foundational to the future success of the Melbourne Children's Campus.

#### **Professor Emeritus Glenn Bowes AO**

<sup>1</sup> References: KF Russell, *The Melbourne Medical School 1862–1962*, Melbourne University Press, 1977; P Yule, *The Royal Children's Hospital: A history of faith, science and love*, Sydney: Halstead Press, 1999.