

Under the Microscope **With Prof Martyn French**

Royal Perth Hospital (RPH) is one of five hospitals in Australia to take part in a research program to develop and test vaccines for HIV and Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infections.

The National Health and Medical Research Council has awarded \$17.7 million dollars to this project over five years to investigate characteristics of immune responses to both infections.

RPH Clinical Immunologist Prof Martyn French is one of the nine Principal Investigators who will join with a national network to undertake this detailed investigation of effective immune responses against these viruses.

“We are undertaking this study with a view to developing vaccines and other therapies that can be evaluated in animal models and then human clinical trials,” Prof French said.

Prof French said the project involves the best researchers in Australia and he is confident that together they can address this ongoing problem.

“The program combines researchers from around the country with skills in virology and immunology and expertise in translating findings from the laboratory into human clinical trials,” he said.

Prof French’s role will be to investigate immune responses to HIV and HCV in collaboration with other members of the Viral Immunology and Immunogenetics Unit of the School of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine of the University of WA (UWA).

“These virus infections elicit many different immune responses, some of which cause harmful activation of the immune system whereas others control the infection,” he said.

“What we need to find out is which responses cause immune activation and which control the infection so that we can develop the appropriate treatments and vaccines.

“At the moment we have medications that can suppress these viruses but can’t get rid of them altogether.

“We also need to learn more about the role of antibodies that people produce to fight the virus. If we can learn more about this then we might be able to find a treatment to fight it off completely.”

This study will integrate laboratory science, clinical studies, animal models and human trials and the team will meet twice a year and will have teleconferences every month.

"I have high hopes that we will make some important discoveries and also help develop the careers of younger investigators," Prof French said.

"I also hope that this grant will make a substantial contribution to the newly established School of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine of UWA and to Research at RPH."