

FLINDERS FOUNDATION AND MNDSA RESEARCH FELLOW – OCTOBER 2022

A new Fellow, based at the Flinders Motor Neurone Disease (MND) Clinic, will oversee an exciting patient trial investigating the effectiveness of a drug combination used to treat HIV in slowing the progression of MND.

Dr Alexandra Thompson has been appointed as the new Julie Lawrence MND Fellow at Flinders and will be involved in a worldwide trial called 'Lighthouse II', led by Professor Julian Gold of Macquarie University, Sydney.

Lighthouse II is the first phase three clinical trial in the world to use modern combination anti-retroviral therapy in patients with MND.

The COVID-19 pandemic slowed a lot of research across the world, and Dr Thompson said it was pleasing to get the third phase of the trial underway.

"Lighthouse II is a trial that involves people, it's not just looking at drugs in a lab. It's looking at whether a very well-known and frequently used combination of common anti-retroviral drugs used in HIV can have any impact on MND," Dr Thompson said.

"The trial is based on interesting research about some viruses that have been integrated into the human genome over millions of years, which are thought to be retroviruses similar to HIV. It's a placebo versus real drug trial and we'll be following the patients for two years to see whether it has any impact on quality of life, symptoms, and survival."

Established in memory of Dr Julie Lawrence – the first female plastic surgeon in South Australia – who passed away from MND in 2019, the fellowship will support Dr Thompson to care for people and their families living with MND and progress research at South Australia's sole MND clinic.

Julie's husband Steve and brother Graham made this fellowship possible, donating to the Motor Neurone Disease Association of South Australia (MNDSA) who have partnered with Flinders Foundation and the Flinders Medical Centre Clinician's Special Purpose Fund.

Dr Thompson is extremely grateful to receive the fellowship, which will incorporate patient care and research.

"It's not a matter of the funding making it easier, it's the difference between the research happening or not. Being able to fund a Fellow, like myself, as well as research coordinators, study coordinators, and research nurses is the only way it can work. It's imperative and central to the wheels turning. It's more than just important, it's essential."

"I've supported several patients with MND before, but only intermittently throughout my years of physician training, so to be able to come to a speciality clinic is a real privilege and something I'm very excited to be a part of," Dr Thompson said.

"It's also a great opportunity to get involved in research, which is something we all strive to do in our training, but it can be challenging finding opportunities or finding time to be involved in research.

"To be at a place where research is a central part of the day-to-day workings of the MND clinic, and planning for multiple trials on the horizon is fantastic. It's great for my learning and experience, but most of all it's fantastic for the patients."

Dr Thompson will work closely with respected Flinders Medical Centre Neurologist A/Prof David Schultz, who is an experienced clinical trials physician and well-published in many areas within Neurology including MND.

Dr Thompson said research such as this wouldn't be possible without generous supporters, like Julie's husband Steve and brother Graham.

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