

Q&A Ashok Saluja

1. What inspired you to pursue a career in medical research?

I had gone through my education always knowing I wanted my career to be in science and research. The decision of medical research specifically grew out the fact that it was where the funding was and therefore the jobs, but it was also where the interesting and exciting research was happening.

2. What have been the major challenges you have faced in pursuing a research career?

There are two basic fears and challenges that every person in research has; a) will I run out of ideas and b) will I run out of funding. A surplus in either one of these areas without the other will do no good; you cannot make a difference with your funding if you do not have valid or relevant ideas to research. Vice versa you can have the best ideas for research but if you are unable to get the funding you will never be able to act on them. That is a constant fear and challenge daily, no matter of how successful you have been in the past, making sure there is a balance is key.

3. You completed your early university degrees in India but moved to the US for your doctoral studies. What was the motivation behind this move?

There were better opportunities in the United States in terms of postdoctoral education and professional experiences. It is where there was funding and therefore where the science and research was happening. I would have absolutely preferred to stay in India if I would have had the opportunities there; however the research landscape is just not the same. This is a great reason why Australia should want to fund Medical Research, to retain their best and brightest minds.

4. You spent 20 years of your career at Harvard, home to the world's best medical school. What makes it so great?

Funding, ideas, the people, the resources and equipment etc. It is really a snowball effect; they attract top tier minds which attract top tier funding which in turn continues to attract more and more bright young minds. It is inspiring to be a part of an organization like that.

5. Why pancreatic cancer?

Quite simply, it was a logical progression of my work

6. You are now running a phase I clinical trial on Minnelide. It is a long pipeline from the first pre-clinical observations to human trials. Can you reflect on some of the challenges in maintaining momentum with this project, particularly in view of the short-term funding models under which most research grants operate?

Short term funding is certainly a problem and an obstacle to overcome. I have been fortunate in my work to be able to connect with the right resources at the right time. Specifically the reasons I have been able to be successful and maintain funding is that I have been able to source funding through a collaboration of University sponsored funds, philanthropic donations, federal funding and private company funding.

- 7. You have devoted your life to developing a cure for pancreatic cancer and personally invested in the company which you co-founded to take Minnelide to clinical trial. You must strongly believe that a solution is in sight?**

Yes. What can I say, I am a born optimist. I do truly believe there will be giant progress made within our lifetime in terms of treatments and solutions, and I want to be a part of this discovery.

- 8. Many believe translational research should be left to the big companies who have the money to develop basic findings. Industry tends to favour labs and people with a strong track record and if a researcher doesn't have that, it's up to their passion and belief in their work to push the translation to patient care. Is there a way to improve the interaction with industry?**

Yes, I do believe that industry and academia need to work better together, the two wheels of the cart so to speak. For the people who say that basic research should be left to the big companies, I disagree. Industry tends to want to the short term gain; they are not interested in the basic findings on which translational patient care is based, that takes too much time; this should be left to academia. It would be ideal for industry to support funding to academia where these initial findings are made. Wouldn't it be nice if pharma industry spread 2% of their revenue evenly to support basic research in academic institutions? After all, most of their revenue generated is based on research discoveries made in academic institutions.

- 9. How does the research landscape when you were first starting out compare to the landscape faced by early career researchers today?**

It is much tougher now. When I was starting my career the NIH funding success rate was 30-40%. Now, on a good day, it is only around or under 10%. This is not only due to decreased/stagnant funding, but also because so many more amazing young minds are in the research field. This is great, the more bright minds working to solve the world's problems the better, it would be nice if more of their work could be funded however.

- 10. The peer review process has faced attack from some quarters at various times. How important do you think peer review is in ensuring excellence?**

I think it is very important. Certainly, it is imperfect and has flaws but it is the best system that we have to assessing the work being done.

- 11. In an ideal world, how do we best foster the enthusiasm and passion of our young researchers to allow them to achieve their full potential for discovery?**

Funding will be important. Currently, the career outlook is negative with so few successes in terms of sustaining funding. This discourages young researches from pursuing a career in academia and forces them to look into industry for careers. It is overwhelming for young researcher to think about the fact only 10% of the time they will be successful in gaining funding for their work; this will need to improve to be able to inspire new minds towards discovery.

- 12. Are you optimistic about the future of the health and medical research sector?**

Yes, I am a born optimist. Specifically though, I have been privileged to work with so many brilliant young minds over the years who have such strong enthusiasm, persistence and passion about their work; I have no doubt that as long the resources are available to allow these people to be successful, the medical research sector will flourish.