

Professor Ashok Saluja - ASMR Medallist 2015
Speaking at the National Press Club of Australia

THUNDER GOD VINE SENDS PANCREATIC CANCER REELING

Professor Ashok Saluja from the University of Minnesota is a man on a mission – **to cure pancreatic cancer**, a disease that kills one quarter of a million people worldwide each year. This disease is a death sentence, with average survival less than 6 months, and compared to other cancers has received the least amount of research funding.

As a result of sustained government funding for over 30 years, Prof. Saluja has conducted breakthrough research into a treatment for pancreatic cancer, recently culminating in the development of a novel drug, *Minnelide* (based on an extract from the Thunder God vine or *Tripterygium wilfordii*). This drug is showing extraordinary promise, shrinking tumours in 70% of patients in a clinical trial. A striking result given current treatments for pancreatic cancer at best only slow tumour growth and prolong survival for no more than 4 months.

Despite this remarkable progress, the journey from bench to bedside for this particular discovery has not been without obstacles. A passionate and dedicated scientist, Saluja has the courage of his convictions, personally investing to ensure this discovery could move into clinical trials.

Clinical trials are expensive but, as Saluja explains, *"if you think research is expensive, try disease. Over \$3.5 billion is spent on caring for patients with pancreatic cancer, yet this does not increase survival. Imagine if only a fraction of this health care cost was invested into research for a cure."* Saluja believes that, in an ideal world, industry has a role to play: *"Wouldn't it be nice if the pharma industry invested 2% of their revenue to support basic research? After all, most of their revenue generated is based on basic research discoveries."*

Saluja also believes Australia must invest in retaining their best and brightest researchers. Of his own experience, he says *"I reluctantly left India to live in the US because that is where the opportunities were. This is a powerful lesson for any country because it means that passionate young researchers will go where they can have a chance to succeed. Governments here and around the world must consider what kind of future they envisage."*

Australia has a strong international reputation for basic research that has improved global health outcomes. This is due to a rigorous peer review system ensuring that the most promising research receives funding. Saluja warns that *"the current grant success rates, which are the lowest success in the history of Australia, will squeeze out our next generation of brilliant minds."*

News Editors/Chiefs of Staff, please note:

WHAT: National Press Club Address

WHEN: 5:15 pm, Wednesday 3rd June 2015

WHERE: 16 National Court, Barton, Canberra.

WHO: ASMR Medallist 2015, Professor Ashok Saluja

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