

The Biobank that Philanthropy Built

After years of careful planning, Melbourne's St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research officially opened the HMSTrust Biobank in September.

A Biobank allows the storage and collection of human blood and tissue samples to help researchers confirm and clarify results in human tissues. The new HMSTrust Biobank will aid research into several diseases, including type 1 diabetes, liver disease including viral hepatitis, cirrhosis and liver cancer, and heart disease. It will contribute to new treatments and allow the application of research knowledge to patient care.

"This project wouldn't have been possible without the support of the Helen Macpherson Smith (HMS) Trust, the Marian and E.H. Flack Trust and our clinical partners, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne," said St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research Director, Professor Tom Kay.

"Their support allowed us to create a 'home' for the Biobank, through funding of infrastructure works and equipment to make this vision become a reality."

While it took 5 years to take the idea of a biobank from wish list to completion, the seeds were actually planted more than 100 years ago by three very different individuals—a determined female philanthropist; a racehorse trainer; and an athlete and successful businessman.

While born within 6 years of each other, St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research's founder, Jack Holt (1879-1951), and philanthropists Helen Macpherson Schutt (née Smith) (1874-1951) and Edwin Flack (1873-1935) followed very different paths in life. However, all three left legacies that have contributed significantly to Victoria and medical research.

Professor Kay says that the 'modern day' researchers at St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research look forward to watching

the HMSTrust Biobank take root and establish itself as a vital contributor to research at the Institute and beyond.

At the launch of the Biobank, the Chair of the HMSTrust, Dr Philip Moors, said he was delighted to see the project come to fruition.

"We are very careful about the projects we support, but this one ticked all the right boxes. We know in time it will provide researchers and clinicians with the tools needed to benefit and improve the health of patients, which is what medical and clinical research is about."

St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research hosts one of the largest groups of type 1 diabetes researchers in Australia, and jointly leads the Australian Islet Transplant Program, in which people with difficult-to-treat diabetes are transplanted with insulin-secreting islets; many of these patients have become insulin-independent thanks to the Program, effectively curing their disease.

Researchers at the Institute are developing blood tests to monitor the human immune response that destroys insulin-producing cells, and also studying the genes that predispose individuals to develop diabetes to gain a better understanding of how the disease develops.

"The new Biobank will capitalise on these strengths, giving our scientists access to essential resources for the conservation and sustainable use of clinical samples from patients with type 1 diabetes. This will help our researchers develop assays to monitor immune function in patients, and to further their research into how and why some people develop type 1 diabetes," said Professor Kay.

The philanthropists

Born in 1879 in the Victorian town of Berwick, racehorse trainer Jack Holt lived much of his adult life with his two sisters in a small 8-roomed cottage in Mordialloc. Holt's life was devoted to racing, and he achieved great success and distinction as a trainer and a judge of quality thoroughbreds.

The death of his sister Catherine in 1945 inspired him to bequeath the majority of his assets to found a school of medical research at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne. Upon Holt's death in 1951, the St Vincent's School of Medical Research was established.

Born in Melbourne in 1874, Helen Macpherson Schutt (née Smith) was a remarkable woman. Helen belonged to a prosperous Scottish-Australian family that was active in philanthropy. At a time when Australian women's philanthropy largely focused on voluntary work, Helen continued a family tradition of generous support in many areas, including the Lost Dog's Home and the Royal District Nursing Service.

Upon her death in 1951, the same year as Jack Holt, the majority of her wealth was used to establish a philanthropic trust to benefit Victorian charities. The Helen M Schutt Trust was renamed the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust in 2001.

Born in London in 1873, Edwin Flack's family migrated to Berwick Victoria, where Jack Holt also spent part of his childhood.

Edwin Flack went on to become Australia's first Olympic champion, winning Gold medals in the 800 and 1500m races at the 1896 Olympic Games in Athens. He followed his Olympic triumph with a successful career in Australia, building up an accounting firm with his father, which later became PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Like Jack Holt, Flack died a bachelor, and wanted to dispose of his assets in a way that would benefit those in need. The Marian and E.H. Flack Trust was established upon Flack's death in 1935.

"More than a century after their births, and due to their foresight and generosity, the legacies of Jack Holt, Helen Schutt (Macpherson Smith) and Edwin Flack, live on through the HMSTrust Biobank," said Professor Kay. "Their lives may have taken different paths, but in this instance their vision led them to the same destination."

For more information about St Vincent's Institute of Medical Research visit www.svi.edu.au

