

**RESEARCHERS**

7 new grants awarded

**INTERVIEW**

Meet past CEO - Rear  
Admiral Guy Griffiths

**COMMUNITY**

REDFEB fun!

**We**  **Life**

**NEWSLETTER – ISSUE 1, 2023**

  
Heart  
Research  
Australia



Member of  
the Order of  
Australia  
honour for  
BioHEART  
project  
leader

**Professor  
Gemma Figtree**

Giving **heart** to the future.

# Well-deserved recognition



Hi, I trust this finds you all well!

Already 2023 has got off to an incredible start! We have one of our own, Professor Gemma Figtree recognised in the Australia Day honours list, we have funded 7 new research projects – 3 of which we feature inside - and we have some truly inspiring REDFEB stories.

With all this positivity there's no better time to reflect on how far we have come as an organisation. So, on page 3, we have interviewed our first CEO and founding fundraiser of HROz – Rear Admiral Guy Griffiths (who has just celebrated his 100th birthday). Guy's hard work and dedication 37 years ago has made HROz what it is today, and we can all be grateful for his role in helping to raise funds to support heart research which has, and continues to, improve the outcomes for so many. Many thanks to Guy, and to all of you for your generous donations, which make a significant difference in the lives of those with heart disease.

So, please enjoy the read.

Warm regards

Nicci Dent - CEO, Heart Research Australia

# Congratulations, Professor Gemma Figtree!

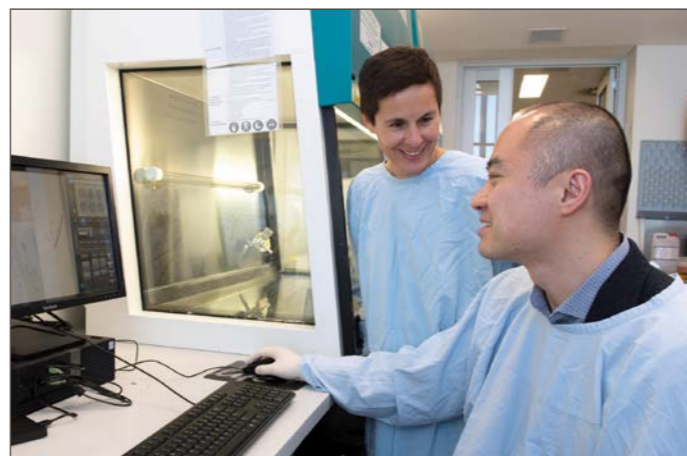
It is such an honour to be appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the people of this wonderful country we live in, and this year we are proud to congratulate one of our own – Professor Gemma Figtree - who received this honour for her significant service to medicine in the field of cardiology.

**Gemma is truly inspiring – not only is she a practicing interventional cardiologist, and a researcher, she is also a Professor in Medicine at the University of Sydney, President of the Australian Cardiovascular Alliance, co-lead of the Cardiovascular Theme for Sydney Health Partners, Chair of the University of Sydney's multi-disciplinary Cardiovascular Initiative - and, most importantly - a mum!**

Gemma embodies our philosophy of investing in early-stage research, as she has been funded by generous Heart Research Australia donors since she was an early researcher. We continue to fund her, and her team's, potentially lifesaving projects today.

The most high-profile project Gemma leads is the BioHEART project which you can read about here: <https://www.heartresearch.com.au/research/bioheart/>

The BioHEART project brings together world class researchers who work across a number of ground-breaking projects. They are all attempting to discover mechanisms and markers in the blood which would



identify those people who are susceptible to heart disease, or at risk of a heart attack or stroke, before it happens and to improve treatment strategies.

The desired end result would be a simple blood test to assess a person's risk profile – which could ultimately save many lives and change the outcomes for so many Australians.

A huge congratulations from all of us, Gemma, and we are truly grateful for the difference you and your team are making in people's lives.

**To read more about Professor Gemma Figtree's research visit our website: [www.heartresearch.com.au/our-researchers/figtree/](http://www.heartresearch.com.au/our-researchers/figtree/)**

# Honouring an Australian icon

INTERVIEW

## If you reach a 100 years' old, what would you like to be remembered for?

For Rear Admiral Guy Griffiths – you could take your pick. This modest but talented individual is one of Australia's most highly decorated naval officers, survivor of a battlecruiser sinking, sought after speaker, a husband, father and grandfather. But for us it would be his contribution to Heart Research Australia – as Guy was the first CEO of Heart Research Australia (formerly known as North Shore Heart Foundation).



It was 1986 when cardiologists Dr Gaston Bauer AM, Dr John Gunning AM and Professor Stephen Hunyor recognised the growing need for a Foundation to be established that would support the first-stages of research aimed at reducing the alarmingly high death rates due to heart disease – and Guy Griffiths was approached to run it.

Initially it was just Guy, armed with just a desk (that had only 3 legs), a chair and a piece of paper.

According to cardiologist Professor Greg Nelson, Guy, who had no previous knowledge of heart disease, "approached the challenge as would any Commander of the Fleet. He embedded himself systematically

within all aspects of the department's activities. He spent time with me in the catheter laboratory. He studied textbooks of the heart's anatomy and he learnt all he could about heart attack management. He then went through every one of our tests from echos to EPS and stress tests. He spent time in the operating theatres and watched coronary bypass and valve surgery. Only then did he come and ask us what we needed. He then went to the community, established corporate visits, and arranged Rotary and Probus meetings. So began the fundraising."

In Guy's words, "it was about opening doors and opening minds". And Guy certainly did that. During his time, they raised \$1 million for heart research and to date Heart Research Australia has contributed over \$35 million to fund heart research projects.

Guy says **"I am just happy that what I began nearly 40 years ago still exists. It says a lot about people's willingness to give and to help find answers to this deadly disease"**.

So, what is Guy doing to celebrate his 100th birthday? Guy is going to the UK to say g'day to his friends at the HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse Survivors Association, of which he is patron. The Repulse was the first warship Guy was on in 1941, when it, along with the battleship Prince of Wales, were torpedoed and sunk. There was a heavy loss of life including one of his classmates. Guy wants to continue to connect with the survivors and honour the sacrifice made by so many.

We wish you a very Happy Birthday Guy and thank you wholeheartedly for your valuable contribution towards changing the future for those with heart disease.

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Wonderful news, we have recently funded another round of exciting research projects, a sample of which we have featured below. These projects look to prevent heart failure and improve survival rates by tackling the disease from different angles. From the use of new scan technology to identify early risk factors; the testing of new drug treatments; through to improving patient outcomes post-surgery. We trust you will be as inspired by these researchers and projects as we are.



**Dr Giannie Barsha:** Looking at a solution to prevent heart failure and improve survival rates in heart attack patients.

Every year around 60,000 Australians will have a heart attack. For those who are lucky to survive the fatal event,

1 in 2 will die within 5 years due to another heart attack or from heart failure, even if they've had surgery or medical treatment. One of the main reasons for this lies in the body's own immune response. A heart attack triggers a strong inflammatory response at the site of injury, that is critical for the repair and regeneration of heart tissue. But the problem arises when this

inflammatory response goes into overdrive, causing severe scar formation and enlargement of the heart, which can lead to heart failure. Anti-inflammatory drugs have been developed to prevent this from happening, but to date, have proven to be of little benefit and they come with severe side effects.

Dr Giannie Barsha and her team have received HROz funding to test a new drug called PKT Inhibitor X, which has a better safety profile than previous anti-inflammatory drugs and is designed to be better absorbed. This drug targets the P2X7 receptor - the protein that drives the inflammatory response in the body. The team will test whether PKT Inhibitor X can block the P2X7 receptor in the heart, to suppress inflammation and promote healthy healing of the heart, following a heart attack. Outcomes from this study will offer a new solution to prevent heart failure and extend survival in heart attack patients.



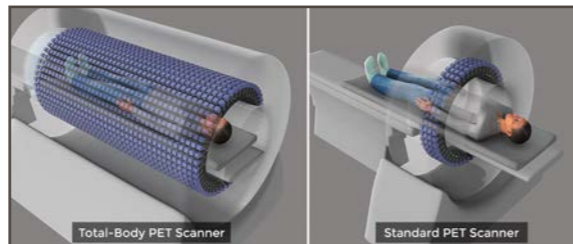
**Dr Nicola Giannotti:** The NARNIA study – using new scan technology to identify early risk factors for a heart attack and cardiovascular disease.

There's an exciting new development in imaging – the

Ultra-High Sensitivity Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scan. The Ultra-High Sensitivity PET scan is being commissioned this year and the Sydney-based team of researchers is planning to use it to improve early identification, diagnosis and treatment of high-risk cardiovascular patients.

Unlike conventional imaging which generally focuses on assessment of the blocked area of the vessel – the Ultra-High Sensitivity PET scan allows functional imaging of all the tissues and organs of the whole body simultaneously, while exposing the patient to significant less radiation dose and reduced scan time.

To date, the assessment and subsequent treatment in relation to atherosclerotic plaque has been



structural based – focusing on how much the vessel was occluded (or blocked). However, this research aims to use the Ultra-High Sensitivity PET scan to look at the growing evidence that suggests inflammation and selected biological functional characteristics found within atherosclerotic plaque are of key importance in predisposing a person to heart attack and stroke - independent of an occlusion.

Dr Nicola Giannotti, from the Sydney-based research team, says we “want to move from a purely morphological (structural) assessment to a combination of non-invasive functional and morphological assessments to provide better diagnostic insights into atherosclerosis, that may identify patients at a higher risk of cardiac disease”.

**Dr Karan Rao:** Looking at a method to reliably predict patients at risk of heart block following their TAVI.

Aortic stenosis (narrowing of the aortic valve) is one of the most common and serious valve disease problems. When it's severe and left untreated, has a mortality rate nearing 50% at five years.



The most common treatment is a transcatheter aortic valve implantation or (TAVI), which is a highly effective and minimally invasive treatment alternative to open heart surgery for patients. However, in up to 1/5 of all cases Heart block or conduction block can occur, and when it does the patient will require a permanent pacemaker.

Usually, the block is apparent in the first two days after TAVI. However, in a proportion of patients it can occur after discharge, leading to dizziness, fainting and even sudden cardiac death in a vulnerable population.

Currently, no validated methods exist to reliably predict patients at risk of heart block following their TAVI. So, Dr Rao's research project is aiming to find a way to predict this by studying 205 TAVI patients. He will assess their pre-procedural CT scan, ECG changes, as well as use highly novel invasive electrophysiology techniques, in the aim to improve the current prediction algorithm for heart block following TAVI.

To help Dr Rao and his team, all patients will have a loop recorder implanted which will allow them to accurately, continuously and remotely monitor patients heart rhythms for up to two years following their procedure. This will give them detailed insight into the predictors, the risk factors, the timing, and even the implications of heart block following TAVI.

When complete this will be the most comprehensive prospective study of its kind worldwide. The risk algorithm will also allow the team to assess the viability of same day discharge in our local population, which will also be an Australian first.

Overall, this exciting and innovative project will streamline TAVI, improve its effectiveness, improve the congestion in the hospital system, and most importantly, improve patients' outcomes.



## Help needed for heart research study

If you are a person living with heart failure, or you are caring for person living with heart failure who is over 65 – we'd love to hear from you!

Our researchers are conducting a study to explore the adverse effects of heart failure medications in older people.

Participants will be asked to complete an interview or focus group, either face-to face or online via Zoom. The interview or focus group will take no longer than 1 hour to complete and you will receive \$25 Coles Grocery Voucher for your time.

To participate in the study or if you have any questions, please contact:

**Ms Mai Duong:**  
mai.duong@sydney.edu.au; or

**Professor Sarah Hilmer:**  
sarah.hilmer@sydney.edu.au



Ms Mai Duong

Thank you!



It's that time of the year again! Heart Research Australia's REDFEB month, and what a bumper year it has been. Lots of TV and radio interviews (link below) and of course our favourite bit-seeing what our wonderful community gets up to in their endeavors to have fun, while raising funds and awareness of heart disease. Thank you to everyone for your support!

If you'd like to see the media coverage and listen to cardiac experts talk on a range of topics visit: <https://www.heartresearch.com.au/redfeb2023/media/>



**MEGAN O'LEARY'S STORY TOUCHES HEARTS AND RAISES AWARENESS**

If you have been reading The Australian or listening to the Mamamia Podcast 'The Quicky', you may be aware of Megan's story. Megan has kindly shared her story this REDFEB to help raise awareness of the prevalence of heart disease. It's probably not a position you want to find yourself in, but this mum of 2 young boys and step mum to 3 teenagers, wants to tell her story to help us get the vital message out to all Australians (and particularly women), not to ignore any symptoms and to trust yourself if your body is telling you something isn't right.

Megan was only 48 years old when she discovered she had 4 life-threatening heart blockages, largely by accident. She was having a routine pap smear and mentioned to her GP, in passing, that she had had some spasms in her throat and chest. Her GP said it was probably nothing, but thankfully for Megan, thought it was best if she got it checked out by a cardiologist anyway. On following up with the

cardiologist, it was discovered Megan had 4 heart blockages that were between 90-99% blocked and she was just days away from a massive heart attack.

Megan woke up from the procedure, like many people in her position, asking "Why Me?", and she and her husband and sons were left to overcome the thoughts of "What if?". This is what motivates Megan to tell her story and we are very grateful to her for opening up so she can raise much needed awareness. Megan also independently raised over \$6000 for heart research – so thank you!



**MOORE AUSTRALIA (NSW)**



Throughout the year Heart Research Australia is supported by companies who want to make a difference – and one of these is Moore Australia (NSW). Moore undertakes our auditing for us, pro bono, and we are so grateful for their support.

This year their Sydney Team also got into the REDFEB spirit. With more than one of their team directly impacted by heart disease, they wanted their team and the greater community to better understand the signs of heart disease with the aim to save their loved one's lives.

Over February, the team got together to destress. They were provided with information on the warning signs of a Heart Attack, which included the distribution of wallet cards and they listened to guest speakers to learn more about heart disease. Plus, they raised much needed funds for heart research!

Well done Moore Australia (NSW) and thanks for paying it forward!

**In loving memory of Danny Herbert**



These images of beautiful babies and family moments really belie the reality of this REDFEB celebration.

This fundraising event was done in memory of Danny Herbert. Just 58 – a beloved husband, father of 3 and grandfather of 6 (soon to be 7) – who had a fatal heart attack in Feb 2021.

His loving wife Sue said, *"When I came across REDFEB, it opened up my heart and I knew this is what we had to do. To be a part of fundraising for Heart Research Australia, so our loss would make a difference to others and to help our hearts to heal."*

***"Because when Danny died, it didn't feel fair. He was always on the phone making sure others were ok. We felt we had to make his passing heard, especially in the farming community where the guys think that***

***getting a check-up isn't always a priority in their busy lives."***

The Herbert family and friends decided to organise a "Paddle the Pallinup" gathering in WA, and spent a weekend camping to honour Danny and raise funds for life saving research into heart disease.

Apart from looking like they had a truly special and memorable time, they smashed their \$10,000 fundraising goal. To date they have raised over \$12,000 for heart research, in addition to generating an enormous amount of awareness surrounding heart disease and the importance of getting checked out.

Thank you so much to the Herbert family, for turning your tragedy into something so positive.

**A GIFT FROM THE HEART**



Heart Research Australia is incredibly grateful for the gift recently received from the Estate of the Late Rita James. Rita had left 25% of the residue from her Estate for Heart Research and left similar gifts for Cancer, Kidney and Stroke research. Rita was born in King's

Norton in the UK. When she was 3 years old, she moved to Australia with her parents and they settled in Adelaide. When war was declared, Rita enlisted with the H.M.A.S. Sydney and was accepted in the Searchlight unit. Later she was promoted to Lance Corporal and then Acting Bombardier. In 1953 she married Michael, who had been in Africa with

the RAAF and they moved to Victoria where they built their house in Heathmont. She was an active member of the Country Women's Association for 47 years and even became Group President of the branch and receiving a Life Membership. She was a wonderful speaker and in later years shared her knowledge in a local history group. She won a Deakin Award for Community Service.

Rita truly valued the importance of medical research and in this very special way she is helping our researchers to continue their work to find more breakthroughs and improve the outcomes for people with heart disease.





# A legacy for the future

“As a cardiologist for 4 decades, I’ve witnessed the impact heart research has had on our patients. We’ve become able to provide increasingly better care for heart patients thanks to the outcomes from research. These days most heart attack patients walk out of the cardiac ward to recover further at home in only a few days, something that wasn’t happening when I started my career. Similarly, research has led to marked improvement in the treatment of heart failure, a condition with inadequate pumping of blood by the heart for the body’s needs. Funding for new research is hard to come by, yet it is so important to investigate new ideas to improve prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Many of my research projects, and those of other cardiologists and researchers on Royal North Shore Hospital campus, were made possible thanks to funding from Heart Research Australia. I am grateful to the donors and the people who have left a gift in their Will, these gifts make our research possible.”

***Professor Helge Rasmussen OAM***



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To help find the next breakthroughs for heart disease treatment - would you consider leaving a gift of 1% in your Will so we can continue live-saving heart research for future generations?

For more information, please go to: [www.heartresearch.com.au/gifts-in-wills](http://www.heartresearch.com.au/gifts-in-wills)

Or contact: Diane van de Merwe on (02) 9436 0056 or [bequest@heartresearch.com.au](mailto:bequest@heartresearch.com.au)

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***Thank you so much!*** ***Any legacy, small or large will have a positive impact on generations to come.***