

Media Release

Embargo: 7am, Wednesday 11 January, 2006

New year's resolution: to stop kids' sniffles

Scientists welcomed in 2006 with the news they are close to finding a cure for a virus that affects millions of children worldwide each winter.

The research team, led by the Director of the Monash Institute of Medical Research (MIMR), Professor Bryan Williams, believes it is only three to five years before an effective treatment for Respiratory Syncytial Virus is identified.

"Respiratory Syncytial Virus, or RSV, is the most common cause of respiratory tract infection in young children. It's highly contagious and can develop into pneumonia and bronchiolitis," said Professor Williams. "The elderly and people with compromised respiratory, pulmonary, cardiac and immune systems are also at risk."

"In 2001, RSV was estimated to be responsible for the hospitalisation of 100,000 children in the United States.¹ Children who contract RSV often have repeated infections throughout their lives, so drugs to treat this virus will improve the quality of life for countless children worldwide and significantly reduce health care costs," Professor Williams said.

"The clinical trials we're conducting with biotech company Almylam focus on drugs based on RNA interference (RNAi) - a process that occurs in all cells in the body, which blocks certain proteins from being formed. We're excited the results are so promising in RSV patients, but we're still looking at ways we can make the treatment even more effective."

Findings from the latest developments in RNAi research were recently published by Professor Williams in *Nature Biotechnology*.

"I'm confident we will soon have a fast, effective medication RSV patients can take as soon as cold and flu-like symptoms appear. If we're successful, this treatment could be developed for other viruses such as such as the bird flu," Professor Williams said.

Professor Williams commenced as MIMR Director on 3 January this year. His research into RNAi has been internationally recognised and is also applicable to potential cancer therapies.

"Cancer and viruses such as RSV are made up of the same chemical entities, so it stands to reason our research may overlap with a number of different diseases," he said.

Prior to joining MIMR, Professor Williams was the Chairman of the Department of Cancer Biology at the Lerner Research Institute of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation in Cleveland, USA.

Professor Williams brings with him US\$1,000,000 in National Institute of Health funding and a team of cancer experts from around the globe.

"I'm proud to bring this research and my new team to Australia and MIMR. I'm looking forward to working with some of the talented MIMR scientists to ensure our RSV and cancer research continues to make an impact on human disease," said Professor Williams.

Interview / photo opportunity

Professor Bryan Williams will be available for interviews / photo opportunities on Wednesday 11 January, 10.30am-2.30pm. Possible vision opportunities include Professor Williams in the lab with a young child in the high-risk group for RSV.

More information: Julie Jacobs, Public Relations Manager: (03) 9594 7109 / 0408 135 256

1. Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing website