

## Robyn Ward – saving lives through humanity, passion and leadership



Over two decades, Professor Robyn Ward has achieved an extraordinary amount as a pre-eminent Australian cancer researcher and oncologist. Yet the achievement that pleases her most is the simplest: to be able to look after patients, every day, while staying engaged in research.

Robyn refers to this as “bridging the gap” between what happens in science laboratories with what happens in a hospital – and it’s a role she believes more medical professionals should play.

“So many spin-offs for patients come from that,” says Robyn. “They get exposed to extra information or insight into their care they wouldn’t get otherwise.”

### **Making a difference**

Professor Robyn Ward’s humanity, passion, drive and leadership have won her many awards and accolades from peers. More importantly for Robyn, her work has made a difference for hundreds of patients and young researchers who have studied with her and gone on to successful careers of their own.

Since starting her biomedical research career in 1991, Robyn has established and maintained an independent, highly successful research group based at St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney. She is the University of NSW Chair of Medicine at Prince of Wales Hospital and also established and directs the Family Cancer Clinical Unit at St Vincent’s.

### **Bowel cancer breakthrough**

Robyn’s main research interest is identifying factors that determine people at risk of developing bowel cancer. She recently achieved a breakthrough with the discovery of a new pathway by which people can inherit it from their parents. This finding was published in the New England Journal of Medicine, and received widespread attention.

Some of her other successes have been the development of a screening test for bowel cancer, the “humanisation” and clinical testing of human antibodies to treat cancer, and identifying the key role for precursor lesions (polyps) in the development of colorectal cancer.

A major current focus for Robyn and her colleagues is how the risk and rates of progression of cancer are driven by changes in the epigenome, the factor that controls gene expression in cells.

This work has resulted in a new technique to identify which genes are “turned off” in healthy people, so those at high risk of getting bowel cancer can enter screening programs.

On a small scale, it’s already saving lives, says Robyn. While she believes it’ll be years before “a gene chip” is available to tell people what their future holds, she considers it a promising start.

Another focus of interest for Robyn is the study of polyps which people at risk develop in their bowels, identifying why some turn into cancer and others don’t. “Bowel cancer is almost 100% curable if detected early, so this is really important,” she says.

### **Innate curiosity**

Born and raised in Sydney, Robyn attended St George Girls’ High School and entered UNSW in 1979. Her interest in science developed early. “To stay interested in science, you need to be driven by natural curiosity, as well as an appreciation of how it may benefit people.”

## Professor Robyn Ward (continued)

**What of the future?** Robyn believes many advances will come from the increased use of technology in cancer treatment, and that gains against the disease will most likely be incremental. For some common forms like bowel cancers, solutions will probably come from increasing early detection.

Robyn praises the Cure Cancer Australia system of grants which has given dozens of young researchers a chance to develop their ideas. "The Cure Cancer grants support good

ideas where the risk may be high but longer-term outcomes may be substantial. Other funding bodies are generally negative about supporting high-risk research, so a relatively small investment from Cure Cancer in dollar terms goes a long way, filling a vital gap where there are no other support structures."

There's no such thing as a typical day for Robyn Ward because her job is so

unpredictable, spanning clinical work, time in the lab, meetings, looking after patients, advocating for science and medicine and much else.

Leisure time is equally hard for Robyn and her husband (Professor Nicholas Hawkins, a pathologist) to pin down. However, she tries to spend every minute doing the right thing. "I think trying to do the right thing for people day in and day out, hour by hour, is pretty much what life should be about," she says. "That's what motivates me."