Melbourne University tops research grants at $16m

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Matthew Belousoff and his Monash University team have won a $6.4m grant for genomic research. Picture: David Geraghty
Source: News Corp Australia

The National Health and Medical Research Council will today announce almost $100 million in grants specifically for large research teams, with Melbourne University’s Samuel Berkovic’s team collecting the single largest amount at $16.1m, which will be directed toward developing personalised therapies for epilepsy.

Macquarie University will claim the second largest grant: $14.7m for a team led by Richard Kefford that will conduct a large-scale genomic analysis of people with melanoma, aimed at developing better treatments.

The emphasis on genomics reflects a growing international trend in targeting genes to prevent illnesses and develop more personalised treatments.

Last week, the NHMRC issued a call for targeted research into the “genomics revolution” with a grant for the successful team of up to $25m. That would be the NHMRC’s second biggest grant behind the $28.3m awarded in 2008 to the International Cancer Genome Consortium led by Brandon Wainwright.

In all, 11 grants worth $98.3m will be awarded today. That is in line with 11 last year worth $101m.

Monash will secure a $6.4m grant as part of its collaboration with British genomic research leader the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute.

The collaboration provides Monash with access to Wellcome’s $50m hub for gene sequencing.
and will be focused on finding treatments to combat growing antibiotic resistant bacteria.

A key target is klebsiella pneumonia, which the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention says is “an immediate public health threat that requires urgent and aggressive action”. Monash will also target a salmonella bacteria that causes typhoid.

“Effectively our researchers will be treated as members of the Sanger Institute, with access to red-hot gene-sequencing projects, without any additional costs to Australia,” team leader Trevor Lithgow said.

Team member Matthew Belousoff said the aim was to get around antibiotic resistance by targeting bacteria that cause disease. “Antibiotics are a nuclear bomb strategy that kills everything, but we are looking to use a more targeted missile approach,” Dr Belousoff told the HES.