ON TO A WINNER

For more than 7 years Professor David Ma and his team have been working towards a big vision, one where stem cell transplants are available to all people, no matter what their means. Focusing on providing their expertise, training and support to medical teams in developing countries, at the end of 2018 the team embarked on their second mentoring trip in Manila, working with the team at the National Kidney Transplant Institute (NKTI), Philippines to fulfill the dream of Professor Honorata Baylon to establish the first transplant center for all Filipinos. For all involved the trip felt like they were on to a winner; in more ways than one.

Manila is the beating heart of The Philippines, a nation of 100 million people and 7000 islands. And for the team, landing in the capital in November 2018, it felt like they were being thrown into a land of extremes “the view from my hotel room looked like a war zone, high rise malls in various stages of construction dominated the landscape on one side and poverty stricken slums took over the other” said Amanda McLaughlin, clinical nurse consultant. During the week they spent in Manila, David, Amanda and Helen, senior stem cell scientist, from St Vincent’s partnered with the team from NKTI to supervise and witness the stress and excitement of their first stem cell collection after years of training and preparation.

Throughout it all they experienced the extreme living conditions most Filipinos consider the norm “Doctors work 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, and on top of that they spend hours commuting in bumper to bumper traffic. Yet their enthusiasm, working in cramped conditions, with the bare necessities never dwindles” said Amanda. Working in these conditions set the stage for an experience that resulted in outcomes that made the patients, doctors and nurses involved feel like they were really on to a winner...

A WINNING STEM CELL COLLECTION

After several years of training and preparation, a successful collection and cryopreservation of stem cells means a new lease on life for the first patient in the new unit. For Dr Lynne, Dr Roxan, and the team at NKTI, working with their first patient, a wife and mother, this is exactly what they were able to do. “We had such a good stem cell count the nurses were all joking with me that maybe we could use some of the extra cells to fill in her wrinkles! It’s these kinds of moments that are the most gratifying, they remind me that I’m on the right path in life. And without the expertise, training and support of the team from St Vincent’s we wouldn’t be where we are today” said Roxan.

A WINNING LEARNING EXPERIENCE

For the team at NKTI the opportunity to learn from and be mentored by the Australian team was more than just an exciting opportunity, “for us being chosen to be part of the team who would learn these new skills was also an incredible privilege. We know this procedure represents hope for our patients and enables us to better serve the community, which at the end of the day really is the reason why I’m in this field” said Mercedita, an NKTI nurse. The same is also true for the team from St Vincent’s, who came back from the experience having gained a new perspective and deeper understanding of how different cultures and systems impact the delivery of healthcare.

A WINNING CONNECTION

“when you work with people so closely, like we were, and you experience intense moments of learning and practice together, that shared experience creates a bond. Our bigger vision of making stem cell transplants available to all will only be realised if we’re able to build a strongly connected network of experts. That’s how we’ll get the scale we need to make this happen” said David.

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The National Kidney Transplant Institute