

Heartbeat

St Vincent's Foundation Newsletter

Autumn 2025

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SURGICAL SYSTEM

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Message from the Executive Director

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I am delighted to introduce you to our rebranded newsletter, Heartbeat. The new name celebrates our supporters as the beating heart of our St Vincent’s story. Since the Sisters of Charity established our first hospital more than 132 years ago, St Vincent’s has been built on a culture of generosity. And today that spirit lives on through you.

In Heartbeat, you will notice the powerful “heart” symbol from the Mary Aikenhead Ministries Crest, reflecting the compassion we extend to those we serve. However, without you we can only go so far – it is your love and kindness that elevates the excellent care we provide for our patients.

In this Autumn edition, we hear from Dr Eldon Mah who tells us about a revolutionary piece of technology that is making surgery more precise than ever before. We see the power of philanthropy in action when our maternity services team at the St Vincent’s Private Hospital Fitzroy come together to fund a breast pump for new mums visiting our hospitals. We go behind the scenes and chat with the brains behind the Private Hospital Werribee’s biggest annual fundraiser, the Long Table Lunch at Shadowfax, and we hear about Geoff Hook supporting the education of trainee doctors through a gift in his Will.

I also want to personally thank you for your wonderful support of our Christmas appeal. Thanks to you, we raised more than \$100,000 for our Oncology teams. Professor Sue-Anne McLachlan, Director of Oncology and Cancer Services, has told me to pass on her heartfelt thanks. You can read all about how your contribution will support patients with cancer, including Matt Basso, who we’ve been treating for multiple myeloma.

Finally, I can’t underline enough how grateful we are to you for standing by us, especially at a time of economic hardship for many. It is your love and solidarity that motivates us to continue our work so that we can keep creating incredible stories of impact – together.

Kindest regards




Melina Talanis
 Executive Director (acting)
 St Vincent’s Foundation Victoria

It starts with physical health

A new way to tackle drug and alcohol dependence

When patients learn how their drug and alcohol use is directly impacting their physical health, they become more motivated to stop using drugs and alcohol.

That's what Professor Yvonne Bonomo, Director of Addiction Medicine at St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne, has proven over the past two years, thanks to donor support.

Now when patients come in for routine treatment for their substance use, Yvonne and her team take the opportunity to assess their heart or lung health and blood glucose level, using equipment funded by a generous donation.

"We are so grateful for this equipment... It enables us to look after people holistically," Prof. Bonomo said.

St Vincent's is the first addiction medicine service in Australia treating addiction in this innovative way, which focuses on the patient's overall health and physical impacts of taking drugs and alcohol, in addition to the substance use itself. The results have been unexpectedly positive.

"Coming at the problem sideways through the physical effects takes our patients by surprise. We help them understand how using alcohol, methamphetamine or opioids impacts their heart, or how smoking affects their lungs," Prof. Bonomo said.

"The conversation changes from 'let's stop you from using drugs or alcohol' to 'let's address your health issues so you can feel better.'"

Patients leave the clinic with more motivation to stop drinking, smoking or taking other drugs in return for feeling physically better.

One of the tests uses a smokerlyser, which is like a breathalyser but measures carbon monoxide in people who smoke tobacco. The reading is colour-coded – if a person smokes less or stops smoking, their result shifts from red to orange to green.

"We're not focusing on the tobacco or the cannabis, we're saying, 'we really want to get your lungs to be as healthy as possible so you can breathe more easily.' We have patients who are so motivated to get into the green zone, that they can't wait for their next appointment," Prof. Bonomo said.

After assessing the patient, the team can then refer them to a specialist at St Vincent's Hospital if they need further care. Prof. Bonomo said she has personally walked patients over to our specialists so they can be seen right away.

Image right: The artwork in the Department of Addiction Medicine features fractals, intricate repetitive patterns known for creating a calming and captivating atmosphere, ideal for the patient waiting room.

"We take a really active role in removing the barriers for our patients to get the health care they need. Many of our patients don't do well sitting in a clinic waiting room with long wait times. Their lives are often unpredictable day-to-day, so attending appointments on time can also be challenging," she said.

Our thanks go to the charitable trust and foundation support that makes this work possible. A generous \$5,000 gift provided a blood glucose monitor to help detect diabetes, two smokerlysers to show how people's lungs improve when they smoke less or quit, two alcohol breathalysers and drug testing strips to assist with screening.

Professor Yvonne Bonomo

Director of Addiction Medicine, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne



New robot pushes the boundaries in surgical techniques

St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne is embracing the next leap in surgical innovation, becoming the first hospital in Asia-Pacific to adopt the Symani robot.

There has been little technological advancement in microsurgery since St Vincent's established one of the first microsurgery programs globally 50 years ago.

Surgeons of that bygone era drew inspiration from jewellery makers to develop surgical instruments that allowed them to operate on a small scale. While these instruments are still being used today, there are limitations on what they can do due to the capabilities of human hands.

The Symani machine represents the next frontier in surgical techniques. Using robotics, it mimics the surgeon's hand movements and wrist motions, allowing them to operate at a scale 20-times smaller than humanly possible, reach areas difficult to access and reduce the incidence of hand tremor.

"Having the Symani means we can conduct lifechanging procedures that aren't possible with traditional instruments. Patients with diabetic foot can keep their foot, or someone who loses a fingertip can have it reattached," said Dr Eldon Mah, a reconstructive surgeon at St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne and the Project Team Lead.

The Symani could also reduce the need for patients to undergo multiple surgeries, improving their recovery time, as well as significantly reducing the level of fatigue experienced by surgeons, who may operate for up to 13 hours or more at a time. Using the machine as a learning instrument could even expedite training of emerging surgeons, who typically take more than 20 years to master their craft.

Through St Vincent's newly created Clinical Microsurgery Robotic Unit, the Symani is currently being used for breast reconstruction, sarcoma and head and neck cancer reconstruction surgery. However, there is huge potential for broader application in other surgical procedures, including those managing side effects of cancer treatment, like lymphoedema.

"We have operated on 23 patients so far, and one of the biggest positives has been seeing their improved quality of life post-cancer treatment," said Dr Eldon Mah.

"However, we only have the Symani on loan until August 2025, after which we will need urgent financial support to give it a permanent home in the hospital. Our big ambition is to become a global training centre for Symani and train the next generation of surgeons across the region."

If you are interested in supporting St Vincent's to purchase its own Symani robot, contact Anthony North, Senior Philanthropy Manager on **(03) 9231 3361** or anthony.north@svha.org.au

St Vincent's has been a global leader in reconstructive surgery for decades, including performing Australia's first hand transplant about 13 years ago.



Symani
SURGICAL SYSTEM

The Symani is changing surgery in the following ways:

- Increases surgeon control, avoiding tremor
- Operates on a 20x smaller scale
- Increases efficiency – fewer surgeries required by patients
- Makes previously impossible surgical procedures possible
- Reaches hard to access areas
- Stitches vessels smaller than 0.5mm
- Reduces surgeon fatigue
- Expedites training of future surgeons

The legacy of Geoff Hook

Training the next generation of junior doctors

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Geoff Hook was always on the move. Whether on the athletics track in his teens, running ultramarathons in his thirties or cycling into his seventies, Geoff never sat still. Being so fit and active, no one saw Geoff's death coming.



Associate Professor Tim Haydon and Dr. Nathan Chua, a trainee in Anaesthesia rotating to ICU, who recently used the ultrasound simulator as part of a training course.

While on his daily bike ride with his cycling group, Geoff suffered a catastrophic brain incident which resulted in his sudden death, aged 76. Geoff had replaced running with cycling later in life after he was diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension, a condition affecting the heart's ability to pump blood to the lungs.

Having spent his lifetime volunteering, Geoff followed a mantra he had learnt at Melbourne High:

“You must return to society the benefit bestowed on you by an excellent education.”

Image below: Associate Professor Tim Haydon demonstrating the ultrasound simulator.

It therefore came as no surprise to his friends that Geoff would continue to uphold this value beyond his lifetime.

“St Vincent’s was high on his list, mainly because of my wife’s longtime nursing involvement with St V’s. Geoff was also very grateful to his cardiologist, Associate Professor David Prior, who cared for him when he was diagnosed with his lung condition and wanted to keep him on his bike,” said friend Peter Logan.

Geoff’s gift was used to purchase a new ultrasound simulator, an education tool that helps trainee doctors learn how to conduct ultrasounds.

Previously, trainees would learn this skill by conducting scans directly on critically ill patients, which can take considerable

time and interfere with patient care. The new Vimedix simulator enables junior doctors to put their theoretical knowledge into practice safely, enabling a smoother learning curve and transition to scanning real patients.

“With this approach we have trained many junior doctors who will take these skills into practice, helping future patients, and assisting these doctors to teach the skills to future learners. It really is an investment in the future for patients and training doctors alike,” said Associate Professor Tim Haydon, Director of St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne Intensive Care Unit.

With his generous gift, Geoff has gone much further than returning the benefit of his education to society. He is enabling our doctors to pay their knowledge forward too.



Meet the women behind Werribee's biggest annual fundraising event

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Every year the Long Table Lunch at Shadowfax attracts a group of loyal supporters of St Vincent's Private Hospital Werribee.

A dedicated committee of five women have been the driving force behind this wonderful event, now in its third year. We sat down with Rhiannon Karcoushkas, Sue Rebesco, Michelle Salvalaggio, Brei Scolaro and Amanda Williams to learn more about their passion for healthcare in the west.

What are the goals of the Long Table Lunch at Shadowfax?

Our biggest goal is to gather local Werribee women who share the same community spirit to help raise money for St Vincent's Private Hospital Werribee, so locals don't need to travel to Melbourne to visit the hospital. We also aim to raise awareness of the services the hospital provides, and of course, have fun and enjoy the day!

How much has the event raised so far and what have the funds been used for?

Over the past three years, we've dedicated funds raised from the Long Table Lunch to supporting the redevelopment and relocation of the Oncology ward. This year we raised more than \$85k, hitting our overall fundraising target of almost \$300k! We're so excited to see the facility open in April 2025.



How have your fundraising achievements compared with your original expectations?

When we announced the total funds raised at the conclusion of our inaugural Long Table Lunch in 2022, we were overwhelmed with emotion—brought to tears by the generosity of our guests and their connection to our cause. Together, we made a meaningful impact, and that moment will always stay with us. Each year since, we've hoped to surpass the last—not just for a bigger number, but for the opportunity to make an even greater difference in the lives of those who rely on the hospital's care.

Why are you so passionate about fundraising for St Vincent's Private Hospital Werribee?

We are passionate about fundraising because we all understand the importance of having access to a fully functional private hospital in the west as something that will benefit future generations. We hope we can continue fundraising for new wards and specialised departments such as paediatric care, ICU and Emergency to meet the growing needs of the community. We personally give generously to the hospital as we believe in the cause, and hope to create a lasting legacy symbolising our commitment to helping the lives of others.

Left to right: Michelle Salvalaggio, Sue Rebesco, Rhiannon Karcoushkas, Amanda Williams and Brei Scolaro.

How important is having a private hospital in the growing western suburbs?

It is extremely important to have a hospital like St Vincent's here in the west, for several reasons, including accessibility and convenience. Travelling for treatment can be costly, time consuming and stressful, particularly for individuals dealing with health conditions that require frequent hospital visits. Being treated close to home means patients have easier access to family and friends who can offer emotional and practical support during their recovery.

What have you achieved as a collective since the Shadowfax committee was established?

Collectively, we've not only strengthened our friendships with each other but also built a wonderful connection with the heads of the hospital. Their dedication to making St Vincent's Werribee the best it can be truly inspires us to keep going and do even more. Seeing the funds we've raised contribute to new facilities and better support for patients is incredibly rewarding—it reminds us why we started and why we continue.

What achievement are you proudest of as a committee?

Our proudest moments are seeing everyone have a wonderful time and return year after year. It's incredibly heartwarming to watch our community come together, united by a shared purpose, and to see the incredible amount we're able to raise as a result. We're also so proud of our committee members—a group of dedicated volunteers who bring their unique strengths, support one another, and work tirelessly to create an experience that's better than the last. Along the way, we share so many laughs, and that spirit of teamwork and joy makes everything we do even more special.

What would you like to say to your supporters who attend every year?

We would like to say a massive thank you for all the support you give us and for your generosity. This day wouldn't be a success without you, and we look forward to enjoying this day together for many years to come.

The greatest gift is a healthy mother and baby

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In a beautiful act of kindness, the maternity services team at St Vincent’s Private Hospital Fitzroy have made a personal contribution towards a new breast pump for women to use while they visit the public hospital next door on our Fitzroy Campus.

Birth Suite Manager, Annette Blake said the gift was an expression of St Vincent’s core values of compassion and putting patients first, no matter who they are or where they are from.

“We’re so excited about the breast pump because there’s a commonality of purpose between supporting women in the public space, and we should always have something available to do that,” Annette said.

“It saddens us deeply to think that there’s any woman, particularly in a sister hospital next door, that doesn’t have access to what they need to support themselves and their babies.”

Breast pumps are essential for helping mothers pump and store breast milk so their baby doesn’t go hungry when they cannot be with them. This is important when a new mother is admitted to hospital for a health issue that temporarily separates her from her baby.

It’s not the first time the maternity services team has advocated for new equipment that creates a positive experience for women in hospital and improves the overall health of mothers and their babies.

With support from donors, the team was able to purchase new preeclampsia testing equipment which improves the identification and management of a common serious medical complication in pregnancy.

St Vincent’s Private Hospital Fitzroy, through St Vincent’s Pathology is only the second hospital in Victoria to offer this new test, which greatly improves outcomes for both mother and baby, and underscores our reputation for providing excellent care to women with complex pregnancies. With women giving birth at an older age, a larger average body mass index among the general population and more IVF pregnancies, the risk of preeclampsia is rising.

The test delivers a fast and accurate reading that allows clinicians to act quickly if there is something wrong, or alternatively reduce the number of hospitalisations of women with suspected preeclampsia by reliably ruling it out.

Preeclampsia currently affects 5-8% of all pregnancies in Australia, with 1-2% of cases severe enough to threaten the lives of both the mother and her unborn child.

The maternity services team is now turning their attention to meeting other equipment and technology needs. Their wish list includes upgrading their resuscitation machines, buying a camera to create mementos for families who have lost their baby, and installing water immersion baths to relieve pain and support women’s mental and physical recovery from birth.

Annette said drawing good people together to do good things could achieve a lot for the greater good.

“It’s about using your power for good. Not as an individual, but as part of a team,” she said.



Annette Blake
*Birth Suite Manager,
St Vincent’s Private
Hospital Fitzroy*



Thank you for supporting our Oncology team

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St Vincent's launched a major fundraising appeal in the lead up to Christmas 2024, which has raised much-needed funds for our cancer services and oncology team.

Thanks to your incredible generosity, we have raised a total of \$100,000. We continue to be blown away by the scale of our supporter community, and your support is even more appreciated during a cost-of-living crisis.

Your support will go towards helping patients like Matt Basso who received treatment at St Vincent's. Matt was expectedly diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer, after seeking treatment for back pain after lifting a heavy terracotta pot.

"If you asked me how I got through all this, I'd say it was a combination of my positive attitude and my confidence in the St Vincent's team. I knew they'd do everything in their power to give me the greatest care," Matt said.

As the number of cancer cases coming through our hospital doors continues to rise, your support has been particularly timely, helping us to:

- Replenish our wig and headwear studio to provide **high-quality wigs** for patients experiencing hair loss during cancer treatment.
- Provide specialised **training for oncology nurses** to ensure compassionate, expert care.
- Purchase a new **Apheresis machine** to help blood cancer patients like Matt with lifesaving stem cell collection.
- Create **special care packages** to guide and comfort patients through their treatment.

Professor Sue-Anne McLachlan, Director of Oncology and Cancer Services at St Vincent's Hospital, said she and her team were overwhelmed by the support.

"We are very grateful for your generosity. Your contribution will play a huge role in improving the experience of our patients and their families at a very challenging time in their lives. Thank you."



IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO GIVE

You can help to support other patients like Matt by donating today.

Better and
fairer care.
Always.



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