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Sydney Researchers Launch Project to Prevent Cancer Return

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A landmark Australian medical research program has received a \$25 million funding boost aimed at reducing deaths from breast cancer by preventing its return.

The National Breast Cancer Foundation (NBCF) has awarded a major grant to the Garvan Institute of Medical Research in Sydney to fund a new project titled "AllClear." The program will be led by Associate Professor Christine Chaffer and focuses on identifying and

eliminating dormant breast cancer cells that can trigger a recurrence of the disease, sometimes years after successful treatment.

Around 21,000 people in Australia are diagnosed with breast cancer each year, and roughly 3,300 lose their lives to the disease. While medical advancements have significantly improved early detection and treatment, recurrence remains a serious risk. Approximately 15 per cent of breast cancer survivors experience a return of the disease, often in the form of secondary cancer that is more difficult to treat.

“This research will allow us to better understand the dormant cells that remain in the body after treatment,” said Prof Chaffer. “These cells are often found hiding in the bone and are a major cause of recurrence and metastasis, which are much harder to treat effectively.”

The AllClear team will study the characteristics of these hidden cells and compare them to those in primary tumours. The aim is to identify their behaviour, determine why current treatments fail to eliminate them, and ultimately develop new therapies to target them.

For breast cancer survivors like Amy Busdon, the research brings hope. Ms Busdon, a mother of three, was diagnosed in early 2024 just before turning 40. Shockingly, her diagnosis came the same week her mother was also diagnosed with breast cancer.

“It’s just shattering in an instant,” Ms Busdon said. “You think of your children, your husband, and you start planning their life without you in it. It’s devastating.”

She added, “I’ve got three beautiful girls and I want to be here for them as they grow up. Research like this gives me hope.”

Prof Chaffer said one of the biggest challenges facing survivors is the uncertainty of whether their cancer could return.

“The fear of recurrence is significant. It affects mental health and overall well-being, and that stress has its own consequences,” she said.

The AllClear project hopes to develop tools to accurately predict whether cancer cells likely to cause recurrence are still present after treatment, something that is currently not possible.

“If we can confidently tell patients they’re ‘all clear,’ it would be a world first,” she added.

NBCF Chief Executive Dr Cleola Anderiesz said the death rate from breast cancer in Australia has fallen by 40 per cent over the past 30 years. She credited investment in research as the driving factor.

“This progress hasn’t happened by chance. It’s the result of targeted funding, medical innovation, and the generosity of Australians who support breast cancer research,” Dr Anderiesz said.

NBCF, Australia’s leading not-for-profit breast cancer research organisation, remains committed to its goal of zero deaths from the disease.