



MEDIA STATEMENT

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Leading researcher in demand

Acclaimed Western Australian medical researcher Professor Mariapia Degli-Esposti will take up a professorial appointment at Monash University in 2019, while retaining strong links with the Lions Eye Institute (LEI).

Professor Degli-Esposti, the LEI's Director of Research and Head of the Immunology division, will expand her cutting-edge immunology research at Melbourne's [Monash Biomedicine Discovery Institute](#) (BDI), and will retain a research group at LEI.

LEI Managing Director, Professor David Mackey, said the move would strengthen ties between Monash and LEI, and facilitate valuable new collaborations.

"Professor Degli-Esposti has built and overseen a world-class research team at LEI and her contribution has been instrumental in our standing as one of the world's leading medical research institutes," Professor Mackey said.

"We believe this move will result in major benefits to eye research that will eventually translate to significant benefits to people suffering eye disease and vision loss."

LEI Chair, Mr Peter Forbes said: "LEI is delighted to support Professor Degli-Esposti as she continues her dynamic career, and we are thrilled that she will retain a strong association with the Institute.

"We are also honoured to have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Monash BDI. This is a case of 'brain sharing' as the ongoing association with Professor Degli-Esposti will be an asset to both Monash and LEI, and the MOU will leverage greater collaboration between WA and Victoria."

Professor John Carroll, Director of the Monash BDI and Dean of Biomedical Sciences at Monash, said the recruitment of Professor Degli-Esposti would bring new capability to Monash University.

"We are delighted to have someone of Professor Degli-Esposti's calibre at Monash. She is a world-renowned immunologist and an expert in the field of viral immunity. She brings expertise and vision that will further boost cutting edge immunology research at the Monash BDI," he said.

"The MOU with LEI will also provide new opportunities for further collaborative research ventures between the two organisations."

Professor Degli-Esposti said she was thrilled with the development: "I am excited about the immense opportunities that the move to Monash will bring with respect to expanding our immunology research program.

"Over the past 15 years, LEI has provided a great environment for our discovery

research, as well as our translation research efforts. I have worked with many talented people and I look forward to maintaining my interactions with them and LEI.

“I am grateful to Monash BDI and LEI for allowing me to create this new link. It will capitalise on the strengths of the two organisations and create a unique momentum for both immunology and vision research.”

In October this year, Professor Degli-Esposti was elected as a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences.

She was named the Cancer Council WA’s Cancer Researcher of the Year in 2017 for her ground breaking work shedding light on the viral complications that can occur following bone marrow transplantation, which is generally considered the best treatment for blood cancer patients. This work focuses on understanding how the immune system fights infections and cancers, as well as how viruses and cancers can bypass immune responses.

Professor Degli-Esposti has developed world-first pre-clinical models to test the use of immunotherapy to control ‘cytomegalovirus’ infection, which can be a common and life-threatening complication after a bone marrow transplant.

In addition, over the past 15 years under the leadership of Professor Degli-Esposti, the Experimental Immunology team at LEI has made seminal contributions that have important health translational implications including:

- Identified the link between a common viral infection and the development of autoimmunity, and established that this directly impacts the development of Sjogren’s Syndrome, the second most common autoimmune disease in humans. This work provides a new model in which to investigate preventative therapies.
- Demonstrated the safety of ocular gene therapy in pre-clinical animal models and in a world-first phase I/II clinical trial for the treatment of macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness among older people.
- Discovered that contrary to expectations, a common virus (cytomegalovirus) triggers long-lasting inflammation in the eyes, including the neural retina, of hosts with healthy immune systems. Ongoing low grade inflammation has been implicated in many age-related conditions, including many blinding diseases, Alzheimer’s and other chronic disorders.

The Experimental Immunology research team at LEI will, under Professor Degli-Esposti’s ongoing supervision, continue its leading work in a number of important areas, including: the impact of viral infection on the functionality of the eye; the impact of viral infection on neurological tissues including the retina and brain; improving the outcome of bone marrow transplantation and avoiding complications that affect the eye; investigations of novel therapeutics for dry eye disease; and understanding the cause of uveitis and the processes that need to be targeted therapeutically.

It is expected that joint Monash BDI-LEI research programs will expand the scope and reach of both Institutes’ research.

Professor Degli-Esposti will commence her role at the Monash BDI on January 2, 2019.

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About the Monash Biomedicine Discovery Institute

Committed to making the discoveries that will relieve the future burden of disease, the newly established Monash Biomedicine Discovery Institute at Monash University brings together more than 120 internationally-renowned research teams. Our researchers are supported by world-class technology and infrastructure, and partner with industry, clinicians and researchers internationally to enhance lives through discovery.