



## Annual Review 2025



Professor Russell Dale and  
Dr Shrujna Patel, University of Sydney,  
Transformation Grant Winner

# Contents

- 01 Chair’s message
- 02 About Avant Foundation
- 04 Governance Overview
- 05 Transformation Grant
- 10 Research Grants
- 16 Bursary Program
- 18 Member Grants
- 28 Avant Legacy series: Celebrating distinguished members
- 29 Chief Medical Officer’s Message

# Avant Foundation

## Creating transformational change in healthcare

\*IMPORTANT: This publication is not comprehensive and does not constitute legal or medical advice. You should seek legal or other professional advice before relying on any content, and practise proper clinical decision making with regard to the individual circumstances. Persons implementing any recommendations contained in this publication must exercise their own independent skill or judgement or seek appropriate professional advice relevant to their own particular practice. Compliance with any recommendations will not in any way guarantee discharge of the duty of care owed to patients and others coming into contact with the health professional or practice. Avant is not responsible to you or anyone else for any loss suffered in connection with the use of this information. Information is only current at the date initially published.

© Avant Mutual Group Limited 2025

# Chair’s message

As we conclude the inaugural year of the new Avant Foundation, I am profoundly grateful for the journey we have embarked upon together. I’m delighted to share the remarkable progress we’ve made in realising our vision: to create transformational change in healthcare across Australia.

The \$50 million commitment from Avant Group has been a catalyst for impact, enabling us to launch a suite of grant programs that support medical research, education, and health initiatives with a clear focus on quality, safety, sustainability, and professionalism in medicine.

At the heart of our efforts is the Transformation Grant, a bold, \$1 million investment over three years that seeks to reimagine healthcare systems, not just improve them. With a strategic focus on patient safety in 2025, quality improvement in 2026, and sustainability in 2027, this grant exemplifies our belief that enduring change requires long-term vision and commitment. Congratulations to Professor Russell Dale and Dr Shrujna Patel at the University of Sydney on their appointment as our first recipient of this award.

Our Member Grants program, now in its fourteenth year, continues to support early-career doctors and researchers with grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000. This year, we proudly introduced the Miss Lewis Award, celebrating exceptional innovation and setting a new benchmark for excellence in medical research.

We also remain deeply committed to equity in medical education. Through our bursary program, we partner with universities and charitable organisations to support students from diverse backgrounds. Our ongoing collaboration with the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association is a cornerstone of this work, helping to empower the next generation of Indigenous medical leaders.

These initiatives are united by a single purpose: to improve patient care and health outcomes by supporting those who dedicate their lives to medicine. The achievements of this first year are a testament to the power of collaboration, between our members, partners, and the broader healthcare community.

I would also like to thank my fellow foundation committee members, all our independent judging panellists, and our foundation management staff for their passion and commitment throughout the year.

Looking ahead, we are energised by the opportunities before us. With your continued support, we will expand our programs, deepen our impact, and help to shape a healthcare system that is more innovative, resilient and inclusive of all Australians.

Thank you for being part of this journey.

*Beverley Rowbotham*

Associate Professor Beverley Rowbotham AO  
Chair – Avant Foundation



“ These initiatives are united by a single purpose: to improve patient care and health outcomes by supporting those who dedicate their lives to medicine.

# About Avant Foundation

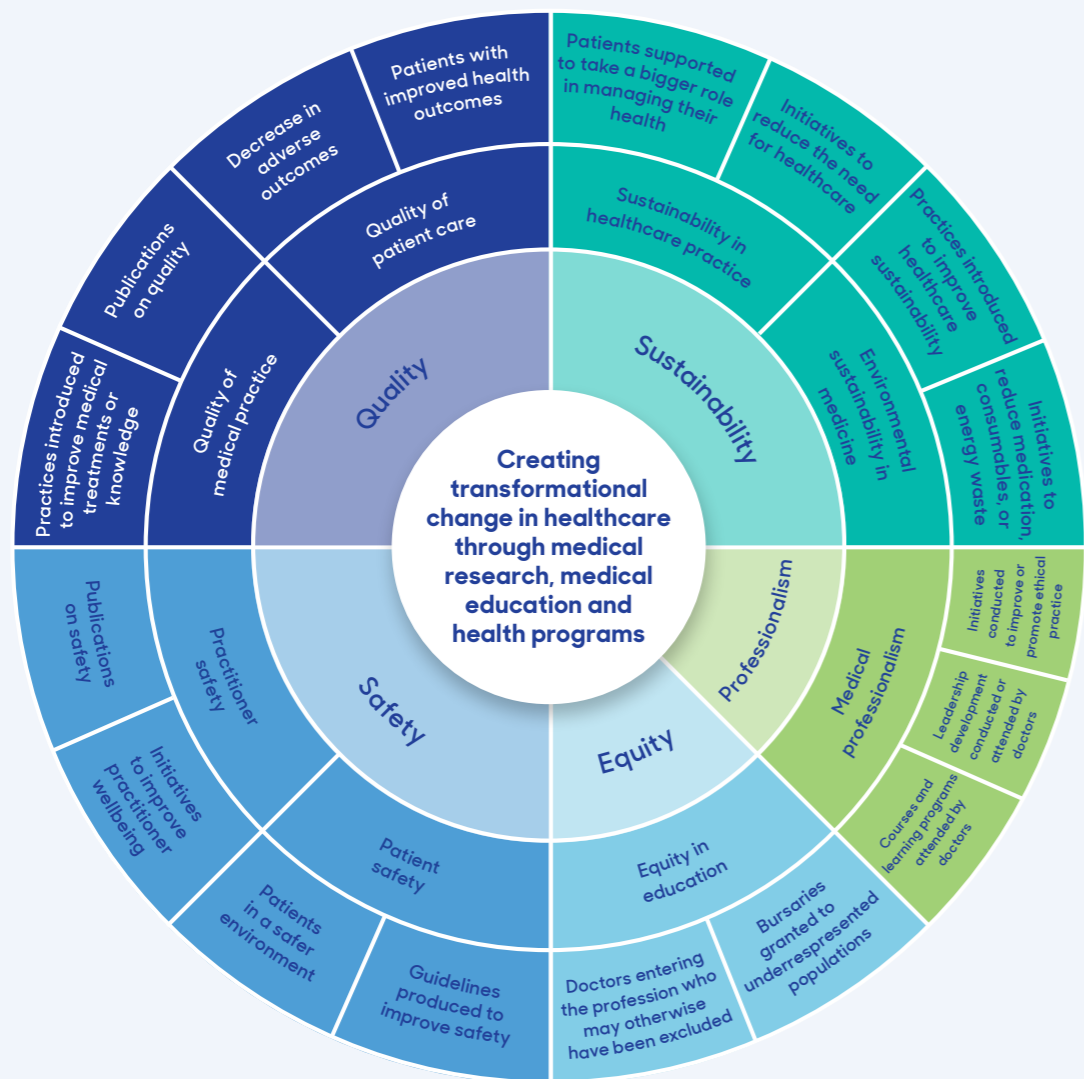
At Avant Foundation, we are dedicated to supporting advances in healthcare. By funding medical research and education, we're empowering medical professionals, and fostering innovation that enhances quality, safety, professionalism, equity and sustainability in the practice of medicine.

We are thrilled to have launched our new 2024–25 Foundation program over the past year, made possible by a generous allocation of capital from Avant Group. The \$50m committed to Avant Foundation aims to ensure the sustainability of Avant's long-standing program of grants.

We've launched a comprehensive suite of initiatives to address some of the challenges faced by the healthcare sector and our members. Programs are available to Avant members, with an emphasis on encouraging young and early-career clinician researchers, as well as larger grants for institutions.

## Strategic Impact

The establishment of Avant Foundation presents a unique opportunity to clearly define, measure and track the impact of our work from the start, guiding our grant-making efforts toward well-defined and demonstrable outcomes. Setting impact goals early can help ensure the funds granted deliver tangible benefits. While Avant Foundation grants range from one to three years, the broader impact goals extend over a 10-year period. This long-term outlook is critical, as it means our work can address current challenges and hopefully lay significant groundwork for sustained progress.



# Our purpose

Our purpose is defined by three key objectives, which guide our efforts and strategy:

Support research

We are committed to funding research projects that push the boundaries of knowledge and innovation in healthcare, ultimately improving patient outcomes and the effectiveness of healthcare delivery. By supporting cutting-edge research, we aim to address critical challenges, such as improving disease prevention, developing new treatments and optimising healthcare systems.

Fund programs

We collaborate with healthcare professionals, institutions and organisations to implement programs that directly enhance patient care and overall health outcomes. From improving clinical practices to driving systemic change in healthcare delivery, our funded programs aim to benefit the lives of patients and communities. These projects focus on areas such as patient safety, personalised care and expanding access to healthcare services, particularly in underserved and marginalised regions.

Support medical educations

Medical professionals are the cornerstone of effective healthcare. We are dedicated to alleviating the barriers that hinder their access to education and ongoing professional development. Through scholarships, grants and support programs, we help ensure medical students and healthcare practitioners have the opportunities and resources they need to excel in their careers. In promoting equity, we prioritise initiatives that provide access to education for underrepresented groups and foster a diverse, inclusive healthcare workforce.

## Goals

2024 was a pivotal year for Avant Foundation, marking the launch of our new Transformation Grant, our refreshed Member Grants and our Research Grants and Bursary programs. Our long-term strategic goals are focused on five pillars that aim to address the challenges in healthcare delivery:

Professionalism

Foster a culture of professionalism among medical practitioners, ultimately leading to improved patient care and health outcomes.

Quality

Advance patient care by prioritising high standards in medical practice and patient outcomes.

Safety

Ensure the safety of patients and practitioners by supporting innovative research in clinical safety and risk management.

Equity


Reduce disparities in medical education and healthcare delivery, ensuring that opportunities for education and career advancement are available to all, regardless of background.

Sustainability


Foster sustainable healthcare practices through eco-friendly policies, resource management and long-term solutions for healthcare systems.

# Governance Overview

## Avant Foundation Committee




**Associate Professor Beverley Rowbotham AO (Chair)**  
MBBS (Hons 1) MD, FRACP, FRCPA, FAICD



**Dr Penny Browne OAM**  
MBBS, Dip Obst RCOG, FRACGP, MHL, GAICD



**Associate Professor Matthew Doane**  
MD MPH DABA FANZCA



**Dr Steven Hambleton AM**  
MBBS, FAMA, FRACGP (Hon), FAICD



**Professor Michael Kidd AO**  
MBBS MD FRACGP FAHMS



**Professor Steve Robson**  
BMedSc, MBBS, MMed, MPH, MD, FRANZCOG, FRCOG, FACOG



**Adrian Urquhart**  
BCom, LLB (Hons), MBA

## Good governance at Avant Foundation

Strong governance is at the heart of Avant Foundation's ability to deliver impact with integrity, transparency and accountability.

As an integral division within the mutual group, the Foundation reports to the Avant Mutual Group Board, but is steered by the Foundation Committee, a diverse group of senior leaders, members, clinicians and experts who provide strategic oversight and alignment with Avant's broader mission to support our members. The Committee meets quarterly to review progress, approve major initiatives and uphold the Foundation's objectives to improve safety, quality, professionalism, equity and sustainability. Day-to-day management of the Foundation is led by a team including our Chief Medical Officer, our Head of Grants and a small operational team.

Grant selection is supported by independent judging panels comprised of experienced researchers, clinicians, members and subject matter experts. These panels assess applications against clearly defined criteria, with a focus on scientific merit, relevance to healthcare improvement and potential for long-term impact. We strive for diversity across our panel appointments to ensure a broad range of experts with different perspectives and to reduce potential bias.

Grant approvals are made through a structured, multi-stage decision-making process that includes eligibility screening, blind scoring, panel recommendation and final endorsement by the Committee. We also offer feedback to applicants where possible, and continuously refine our processes based on stakeholder input.

# Transformation Grant



The Transformation Grant is Avant Foundation's flagship initiative, providing \$1m over a period of three years to support a single, high-impact project with the potential to revolutionise healthcare in Australia. It focuses on fostering innovation that significantly advances medical safety, quality and sustainability. By investing in visionary research and development, the grant aims to create systemic change that benefits patients, practitioners and the healthcare system as a whole.

### Annual focus areas

Each year, the grant targets a key healthcare priority:

- **2025:** Patient and practitioner safety
- **2026:** Quality improvement in medical delivery
- **2027:** Sustainability in health systems

### Grant features

The total funding of \$1m is distributed over three years, with \$350,000 allocated in each of the first two years and \$300,000 in the third year. In addition to the main grant, another two runner-up awards of \$100,000 each are available as flexible funding. Co-funding from other sources is permitted, provided that all additional funds are disclosed at the time of application.

### Who can apply

Eligible applicants include Australian universities, research institutes and health-focused charities. Projects must be conducted within Australia and must demonstrate a strong alignment with Avant Foundation's values. Each project must include a medical doctor in an advisory role. Fundraising or sponsorship proposals are prohibited.

### Application process

The grant application follows a three-stage process:

1. Expression of interest (EOI) – a high-level project overview
2. Detailed proposal – for shortlisted applicants, including full project design, budget and impact metrics
3. Final presentation – top candidates present their proposals to the Foundation Committee.

### Assessment criteria

An independent panel of healthcare professionals will review full applications based on:

- alignment with the grant's objectives
- innovation and clarity of the research approach
- anticipated impact and scalability
- credentials of the project team
- budget justification.

### Winner: University of Sydney

- Project: Epigenetic therapies to transform neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs), including autism, ADHD and Tourette syndrome.

### Runners-up (\$100,000 each)

- The George Institute
- University of Queensland

### Annual grant cycle: key dates

- EOI deadline: 1 November
- Shortlist notification: December
- Full application due: early March
- Finalist presentations and selection: June
- Award announcement: September



Professor Russell Dale

For over three decades, Professor Russell Dale has been on a mission to crack one of medicine's toughest puzzles: how to better understand and treat neurodevelopmental disorders in children. Based at the University of Sydney and the Children's Hospital at Westmead, this leading paediatric neurologist is pioneering research that could transform the lives of thousands of children and families.

Professor Dale has 33 years of medical experience, 18 as a consultant neurologist and 10 as a professor, and has witnessed a seismic shift in medicine. "We've moved from making a diagnosis based only on symptoms to understanding the biology behind disease," he explains. His passion? Biomarkers, the biological clues that can unlock how diseases develop and how they can be treated. More specifically, his focus lies in the intricate dance between the immune system and the brain.

The developing brain is an extraordinary, ever-changing organ, shaping and reshaping itself from conception through to early adulthood. But when this process goes off track, neurodevelopmental disorders like autism, ADHD and Tourette syndrome can arise. These conditions affect 10% of children and carry a heavy societal burden, from healthcare costs to lost opportunities.

"What's heartbreaking," Professor Dale says, "is the families who watch their child lose skills, experience regression or face worsening symptoms after stress or illness, only to hear 'there's nothing we can do'." This 'medical nihilism' leaves many families feeling unheard and hopeless.

## University of Sydney

A new era of epigenetic therapeutics is on the horizon, unlocking the potential for children with neurodevelopmental disorders to thrive.

Unlike rare genetic disorders with clear causes, most neurodevelopmental disorders result from a complex interplay of genes and environment. Factors like infection, stress and diet can influence gene expression through epigenetics, how genes are switched on or off without changing the DNA itself.

At the heart of Professor Dale's research is chromatin, the structure that wraps DNA inside cells and controls gene activity. "When chromatin is tightly wrapped, genes stay silent; when it's open, genes are active," he explains. Dysregulation of this system, he believes, is a missing piece in understanding why some children develop neurodevelopmental disorders.

What makes this research exciting is its potential for intervention. Some existing therapies, like the ketogenic diet, produce metabolites (such as butyrate) that can 'open' chromatin and modify gene expression. Professor Dale and his team have developed a modified form of butyrate designed to reach the brain more effectively. Early lab tests show it can reverse inflammatory markers tied to neurodevelopmental issues.

Thanks to winning the flagship \$1m Transformation Grant from Avant Foundation, this promising research is moving towards clinical trials. The goal? To deliver the first disease-modifying treatments for neurodevelopmental disorders, offering hope where few options currently exist.

This groundbreaking work is a team effort. Neuroscientists, clinicians, dietitians and bioinformaticians work side by side in the vibrant

Westmead research precinct, home to the University of Sydney, Australia's largest children's hospital network, and top medical research institutes. "The clinician-scientist partnership is crucial," Professor Dale emphasises. "We listen to families and bring cutting-edge science to the bedside."

In the next decade, Professor Dale, and his scientific colleague Dr Shrujana Patel, envision a future where neurodevelopmental disorders are understood through biological markers, enabling personalised treatments tailored to each child's unique profile. "It's about moving beyond symptom management to truly modifying disease pathways."

His work is a beacon of hope, not just for scientists and doctors, but for the families whose stories fuel this journey. "We hear you," Professor Dale says. "And we're working tirelessly to help kids reach their full potential."



We hear you, and we're working tirelessly to help kids reach their full potential.

Professor Russell Dale



Visit [avant.org.au/foundation](https://avant.org.au/foundation) for application information.

# Runners Up – Transformation Grant

## The George Institute for Global Health Transforming General Practice in Australia.

The George Institute for Global Health is a leading research organisation dedicated to improving healthcare through innovative, evidence-based solutions. Central to its mission is strengthening primary care, especially general practice, which is the backbone of Australia's healthcare system.

Professor Stephen Jan from the George Institute along with Tracey Johnson Chief Executive Officer of Inala Primary Care in Brisbane, lead a team of health systems researchers and representatives from primary care organisations across Australia to drive efforts to transform general practice nationally.

The group will develop strategies to create a more efficient and sustainable primary care system in Australia.

Australian general practice faces increasing pressures from an aging population and rising chronic disease rates. Current care models are often reactive, with GPs receiving government

funding through Medicare on the basis of service volume rather than patient outcomes. This limits their ability to provide comprehensive, preventive, and coordinated services.

The George Institute advocates for greater targeted investment in infrastructure, workforce development, and digital technology to enable high-quality, patient-centred care. The Institute emphasises integrated care teams, where GPs work alongside specialists and allied health professionals to better manage complex health needs for patients.

Digital tools and data analytics are crucial for supporting clinical decisions and tracking patient outcomes. Funding reforms that reward quality over quantity can motivate practices to focus on prevention and long-term health improvements. Additionally, enhanced training ensures the workforce can meet evolving healthcare challenges.



Professor Stephen Jan,  
B Ec, M Ec, PhD



Tracey Johnson

## The University of Queensland Leading innovation in health research.

The University of Queensland (UQ) is home to world-class research centres, and internationally renowned scholars who are driving major advances in clinical care.

One such leader is Professor André van Zundert, Chair of Anaesthesiology at UQ, and a senior consultant anaesthetist.

In 2025, Professor van Zundert, and his interdisciplinary team, submitted a proposal for a highly innovative project titled 'Improving Anaesthesia Recovery with Patient-Tailored Anaesthesia Reversal Agents'. The research seeks to address one of the most overlooked challenges in modern medicine: the absence of pharmacological agents to actively reverse general anaesthesia.

Despite the routine nature of general anaesthesia, recovery remains an uncontrolled, passive process. Currently, there is no 'antidote' for general anaesthetic drugs such as propofol (administered intravenously) and sevoflurane (delivered via inhalation), which are commonly used in combination.

While most patients regain consciousness relatively quickly, others may experience delayed or incomplete recovery of cognitive function.

To 'wake up' from an anaesthetic with a clear mind and no hangover could dramatically reduce complications and render anaesthesia much safer.

What makes this project innovative is the use of bioengineered human neural cultures and neurocomputation platforms developed in partnership with Cortical Labs. These lab-grown networks of human neurons, derived from induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), are capable of performing basic learning tasks within a closed-loop system that mimics brain-like cognitive processing.

If successful, the project could fundamentally transform the practice of anaesthesia by introducing the first targeted reversal therapy for general anaesthetic drugs and pave the way for safer, more controlled surgical recoveries.



Professor André van Zundert  
MD, DM, PhD, MSc, FRCA, FRSM, FASRA, FHEA, EDRA, FANZCA

# Transformation Grant Judging Panel



Professor Nadia Badawi,  
Neonatologist  
AM, PhD, FRCPI, FRACP, DCH, MSc, MBCh



Associate Professor Matthew Doane,  
Anaesthesiologist  
MD MiPH DABA FANZCA



Associate Professor Chris Milross,  
Radiation Oncologist  
MB BS MD FRANZCR FRACMA GAICD



Emeritus Professor Kim Oates,  
Paediatrician  
AO MD DSc MHP FRACP FRCP FAFPHM



Professor Steve Robson,  
Obstetrician and Gynaecologist  
and CMO (Avant)  
BMedSc MBBS MM MPH MD FRANZCOG  
FRCOG FACOG



Dr Mark Woodrow,  
Emergency Physician and Deputy  
CMO (Avant)  
MBBS, MBA, GDApLaw, GCerts,  
GCEm(ACEM), MACLM, AFRACMA



Avant Foundation's Transformation Grant stands apart in its breadth and vision—welcoming a wide range of clinical research areas while offering meaningful support that reflects a true belief in the groundbreaking potential of our clinicians. The opportunities this grant enables will help turn bold ideas into real-world impact.

Associate Professor Matthew Doane



Professor Russell Dale and  
Dr Shrujana Patel, University of Sydney,  
Transformation Grant Winner

# Research Grants



### Driving innovation and impact in healthcare

Our Research Grants program is a an important contribution to healthcare innovation in Australia. It embodies our enduring commitment to evidence-based, forward-thinking research with the potential to enhance the quality, safety and sustainability of healthcare delivery. Open to universities, research institutions and charitable organisations, the program supports initiatives that demonstrate a clear capacity to inform and transform clinical practice.

### Strategic growth and program evolution

The research grant stream continues to evolve into a nationally recognised and influential initiative. In 2024–2025, we received a high volume of excellent applications, with proposed research showing exceptional relevance, robust execution plans and alignment with strategic healthcare priorities – such as workforce wellbeing, technological integration and equitable access to care.

This growth has been shaped by ongoing engagement with the research community, internal evaluations and continuous refinement of eligibility and assessment criteria. These efforts ensure that funded projects deliver measurable outcomes and lasting sustainable impact across the healthcare landscape.

### Evaluation and funding mechanisms

#### Funding overview

Each successful project is eligible for funding of up to \$100,000, staggered over a 12-month period. While Avant Foundation serves as the primary funder, co-funded proposals are welcome – provided that all additional sources of support are clearly disclosed at the time of application.

#### Eligibility and conditions

To ensure transparency and accountability, grant recipients are required to submit a final project report upon completion. Applicants may only reapply for another grant once this report has been received and approved, supporting the responsible allocation of future funding.

#### Assessment framework

Applications are evaluated through a closed, weighted assessment process that prioritises proposals with strong strategic alignment and a clear focus on outcomes. Key assessment criteria include:

- **Relevance:** Alignment with Avant Foundation’s mission to improve healthcare quality, safety and sustainability
- **Clarity:** Clearly defined objectives, scope and methodology
- **Impact:** Potential to deliver meaningful and lasting improvements in clinical practice or health policy
- **Capability:** Expertise, qualifications and institutional backing of the research team
- **Value for money:** A realistic, justified budget with achievable outcomes within the proposed scope.

#### Annual grant cycle: key dates

- Applications open: September
- Applications close: December
- Review period: December–March
- Recipients notified: April
- Award announcement: September

# Research Grants Judging Panel

**Dr Reece Adler,**  
**Emergency Medicine Registrar**  
BSc (Hons), MD

**Professor Nadia Badawi,**  
**Neonatologist**  
AM, PhD, FRCPI, FRACP, DCH, MSc, MBBCh

**Dr Patrick Clancy,**  
**Senior Medical Adviser (Avant)**  
MBBS (Qld), FRACGP, MHlth&MedLaw (Melb)

**Dr Lauren Feitelson,**  
**General Practitioner Registrar**  
MBBS

**Professor Ian Incoll,**  
**Orthopaedic Surgeon**  
MBBS, FRACS (Orth), FAOrthA

**Associate Professor Chris Milross,**  
**Radiation Oncologist**  
MB BS MD FRANZCR FRACMA GAICD

**Emeritus Professor Kim Oates,**  
**Paediatrician**  
AO MD DSc MHP FRACP FRCP FAFPHM

**Dr Mihir Shanker,**  
**Radiation Oncologist**  
MBBS, FRANZCR, MMed, MPhil, BEng (Biomedical) (Hons), CHIA

**Professor Simon Willcock,**  
**General Practitioner**  
MBBS (Hons), PhD, FRACGP, GAICD

## Research Grant recipients

Project	Funding	Key focus
University of Melbourne	\$100,000	Enhancing doctor training and support in Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) care
Blacktown Hospital/ University of Western Sydney	\$30,000	Translating shared decision-making tools into 10 languages
University of Adelaide	\$59,535	Investigating early retirement trends among female GPs
Menzies School of Health Research	\$85,000	Co-designing a culturally safe pregnancy app for First Nations women
Murdoch Children’s Research Institute	\$5,096	Thermal imaging for improved diagnosis of Strep A
Ingham Institute for Applied Medical Research	\$99,924	AI-powered chatbot for multilingual cancer care (CancerTRUST)
Flinders Foundation	\$100,000	Evaluating a GP-led model for sleep apnea and hypertension management



Dr Kiarna Brown

## Menzies School of Health Research

### Empowering First Nations Mothers with the Dungudbila app: A digital lifeline for First Nations mothers.

In the world of maternal health research, some leaders do more than innovate, they transform. Dr Kiarna Brown, a First Nations obstetrician deeply connected to her community, is driving a groundbreaking project set to revolutionise pregnancy care for First Nations women across Australia.

"My interest is both personal and professional," Dr Brown shares. Growing up in her community and now working as an obstetrician, she has supported First Nations women through pregnancy journeys in diverse settings, from urban hospitals to remote communities. A pivotal moment came during a yarning session when a woman spoke about feeling disconnected from standard antenatal care. "Her story was a turning point," Dr Brown recalls. "It became clear that existing models weren't designed with Indigenous women's needs at their core." This motivated her to advocate for and create maternity care models that thoughtfully incorporate Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Central to Dr Brown's research is the Dungudbila App, a culturally informed, co-designed digital pregnancy education tool. "This isn't just about providing information; it's about empowering women by combining clinical evidence with Indigenous ways of understanding," she explains.

The project aims to improve quality and safety by delivering education that is evidence-based and culturally respectful. It also supports sustainability through community

ownership and exemplifies professionalism by fostering ethical, respectful partnerships with First Nations communities. After the pilot, Dr Brown plans to refine the app with community input and expand it to other regions, championing digital health solutions that are community-driven and culturally appropriate. She's mindful of the challenges ahead, including limited digital access in remote communities, sustaining long-term engagement, and ensuring the app continues to reflect and respect cultural values as it evolves. "We have to be careful not to reproduce existing inequities," she says. "Our goal is to empower Indigenous women fully and respectfully."

Setbacks are part of the journey. "I see challenges as opportunities to reflect and adjust," Dr Brown says. "Regularly reconnecting with the community helps keep our work aligned with their needs and motivates me to keep pushing forward."

Receiving an Avant Research Grant was a proud and humbling moment. "It validates the importance of community-led, culturally safe research," she says. "The funding has been vital for supporting co-design workshops, compensating participants, and creating culturally appropriate content."

Dr Brown emphasises the importance of structured mentorship and strong peer networks for emerging researchers, particularly those working in Indigenous health, where support and guidance are essential for meaningful and

culturally respectful research. "Navigating ethics, translating knowledge, and engaging with policy can be overwhelming without guidance. Collaboration is key." She partners closely with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, maternal health experts, and skilled digital designers to ensure the project remains meaningful and effective.

Looking to the future, Dr Brown envisions a time when First Nations-led digital health tools are a cornerstone of maternal care nationwide. "In the next five to ten years, I hope to see a network of culturally safe resources empowering women across Australia."

Her broader goal is transformative: "I want to help reshape maternal health systems to be fair, inclusive, and truly respectful of culture. This research is my way of contributing to a legacy that centres First Nations women's voices and autonomy."

While funding is critical, she emphasises the importance of holistic support for researchers: "Mentorship, community, protected research time, and institutional support are all essential. Equally important is emotional support, especially when working in areas involving trauma and social justice." Dr Brown's work goes beyond just research, it's a powerful call for justice, cultural respect, and empowerment for First Nations mothers. Under her leadership, the future of maternal health is being reimagined: one that is inclusive, grounded in community, and filled with resilience and hope.

“

The funding has been vital for supporting co-design workshops, compensating participants, and creating culturally appropriate content.

Dr Kiarna Brown



Visit [avant.org.au/foundation](https://avant.org.au/foundation) for application information.



Kristen Kappel

Victoria made history in 2019 by becoming the first Australian state to introduce voluntary assisted dying (VAD) legislation. As a groundbreaking initiative, the service was designed to be integrated into usual healthcare delivery. Yet, the reality is that VAD remains a unique and demanding area of practice, relying on doctors who willingly undergo special training and provide assessments beyond their typical clinical work.

Susan Jury, Director of the Statewide VAD Navigator Service, and clinical psychologist Kristen Kappel, the chief investigator for an important new research project, emphasise that while VAD is a vital service, involvement for healthcare professionals can be taxing, often bureaucratic, time-consuming, and emotionally demanding. "Our role as navigators is to support and sustain the medical workforce involved in VAD," Susan explains. "Since the outset, we've recognised this as a significant challenge to maintaining service delivery."

Their current study is the first of its kind in Australia, aiming to provide evidence that will not only strengthen Victoria's VAD workforce but also guide national efforts. "We are confident that the findings will inform research across the country and help build practical support for doctors," says Susan. The research team hopes their work will encourage more doctors to engage with VAD assessments and care, ultimately improving access for patients. "Depending on the results, we plan to share our findings widely, helping other jurisdictions learn from our experience," Kristen adds.

Both Susan and Kristen bring deep personal and professional experience to their research, shaped by firsthand involvement

## University of Melbourne

### Pioneering support for doctors involved in voluntary assisted dying.

in VAD service delivery. They have witnessed the impact on both healthcare providers and patients, especially when there are shortages of trained doctors. "Many doctors are supportive of VAD but don't complete the required training or provide assessments, even for their own patients," Kristen notes. "Understanding why this happens is a key question beyond our current study."

Their motivation is further fuelled by mentors and colleagues within the VAD research community, including prominent figures such as Ben White, Linda Willmott and Casey Haining from QUT. Susan highlights the inspiration drawn from peers like Dr Maria Ftanou, Director of Psychosocial Oncology at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, and Kate Thompson, Program Director of the Victorian Adolescent & Young Adult Cancer Service, also based at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, whose expertise and dedication fuel the advancement of this field.

Like many researchers balancing clinical work and study, Kristen has faced challenges managing administrative tasks alongside a demanding clinical role. "The application process and research protocols require considerable time and effort," she acknowledges. Yet, receiving the Avant Foundation Research Grant was a significant boost. "It was a

moment of excitement and relief, recognition that made all the hard work worthwhile."

The grant funds will be used to employ a research assistant and cover related project costs, enabling the team to focus on delivering meaningful results.

Looking ahead, Susan and Kristen see their research as just the beginning of Australia's VAD journey. "We intend to remain involved in this evolving field, using research as a foundation for ongoing improvement," says Susan. "Our ultimate goal is to ensure the VAD system continues to evolve and meet the needs of patients and doctors alike. Both underscore the significance of a collaborative research environment, recognising that peer support and shared expertise are as crucial as financial resources.

Susan and Kristen's work is closely aligned with broader health system priorities. Recent reviews by the Department of Health have identified the sustainability of the medical workforce as a critical factor in the successful implementation of VAD. By addressing the practical and emotional challenges faced by doctors involved in VAD, their research aims to strengthen this essential workforce and enhance the quality of care for individuals seeking end-of-life support.



Many doctors are supportive of VAD but don't complete the required training or provide assessments, even for their own patients

Kristen Kappel

## University of Adelaide

### Addressing the challenges facing female GPs through research.



Dr Louise Stone

When we think about general practice, challenges like long hours, administrative burdens and burnout often come to mind. Researchers at the University of Adelaide are addressing these issues head-on, combining her professional experiences with a clear objective to uncover what's really driving young GPs, especially women, away from the medical profession. Lead Researcher, Dr Louise Stone has spent years writing about primary care policy and engaging directly with young GPs. She has identified critical insight: often it's not the clinical work that pushes doctors out, but the increasing layers of regulation, administration, and monitoring. This research aims to expose the unintended consequences of policy changes and provide a refined understanding of workforce attrition, particularly among female GPs.

This research goes beyond numbers, capturing the voices of over 1,200 participants to highlight the widening gender pay gap and the risk of gaps in healthcare provision, especially in women's and mental health services. By amplifying female GPs' experiences, the University of Adelaide's research seeks to inform policies that accurately portray their lived experience.

While academic publications remain important, policy change requires conversations beyond journal pages. Dr Stone is committed to engaging with stakeholders across the health system to ensure these findings influence decision-making and help reduce the premature exit of female GPs from the workforce.

As a female GP, she brings lived experience of systemic challenges, from being underestimated by her peers, to navigating unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. This personal insight drives her passion for supporting marginalised voices within the profession and advancing equality.

A strong network of mentors and colleagues has shaped Dr Stone's work, and she now dedicates herself to nurturing emerging researchers, particularly those facing intersectional disadvantages, to foster a more inclusive research environment.



it's not the clinical work that pushes doctors out, but the increasing layers of regulation, administration, and monitoring.

Dr Louise Stone

Receiving an Avant Foundation Research Grant has been a powerful validation for the University of Adelaide, the funding enables Dr Stone to focus fully on this project, balance her clinical responsibilities and continue supporting patients often underserved by the healthcare system.

Looking forward, she advocates for greater peer learning opportunities, improved research infrastructure for general practice and renewed attention to professionalism. The University of Adelaide believes independent research is crucial to demonstrating the true value of GPs and ensuring sustainable, quality care.

Ultimately, the University of Adelaide's goal extends beyond research output. It is about building a supportive community, elevating underrepresented voices and shaping a future where female GPs can thrive, for the benefit of the profession and the patients they serve.

# Bursary Program



## Program overview

In 2025, the Avant Foundation is proud to support the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association through our bursary program, an initiative dedicated to empowering Indigenous students pursuing careers in medicine. By removing financial barriers and fostering equitable access to healthcare education, the program helps the next generation of Indigenous medical leaders. This bursary not only supports academic achievement but also strengthens leadership development, enabling future Indigenous doctors to drive meaningful change in their communities, ensuring culturally responsive and equitable healthcare across Australia.

## Program goals

### 1. Increase Indigenous representation and accessibility

- Provide essential financial support to Indigenous students across all stages of medical education, from undergraduate to postgraduate, building a strong, sustainable pipeline of Indigenous leaders in medicine.
- Address systemic and financial barriers, particularly for students from rural, remote and underserved communities, to ensure equitable access to medical education.

### 2. Foster leadership and culturally safe care

- Empower bursary recipients through mentorship and career development opportunities, nurturing Indigenous leadership within the healthcare sector.
- Promote culturally safe and responsive care by supporting Indigenous doctors who bring lived experience and deep understanding of their communities' unique healthcare needs.

### 3. Break down educational barriers

- Reduce financial stress related to tuition, study materials, accommodation and living expenses, enabling students to focus fully on their studies and personal development.

### 4. Support professional and community impact

- Build a strong, connected network of Indigenous medical professionals who inspire and support one another, contribute to the broader healthcare system and advocate for equity and inclusion across the sector.

## Program details

### Eligibility criteria:

- Indigenous background: Applicants must identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, as defined by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).
- Enrolment: Applicants must be enrolled in an accredited Australian medical program (undergraduate or postgraduate).
- Financial need: Priority is given to students demonstrating financial need, especially those from rural, remote or underserved regions.
- Academic commitment: Applicants must show dedication to their studies and maintain satisfactory academic progress.

### Bursary amount:

- Up to \$15,000 per year, renewable for up to six years contingent on academic progress. The funds support tuition, study materials, accommodation and other essential living expenses, to promote accessibility and student success.

### How bursaries have evolved to meet emerging needs

Bursaries have evolved beyond simply covering tuition fees, they now play a critical role in promoting equity, inclusion and student wellbeing. Modern bursaries increasingly address the broader challenges students face, including costs of living, digital access, mental health and leadership development. They are designed not only to increase access to education but also to support success, retention and empowerment of underrepresented groups, helping build a more diverse and resilient professional workforce.

Avant has proudly supported the Australia Indigenous Doctors Association since 2019, funding costs associated with seven medical students, focusing on increasing the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the medical profession. This collaboration is part of Avant's broader commitment to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion within healthcare in Australia.

# Aiden Wu: Walking the healing path – a vision for mob and medicine.



I'm not just doing this for myself. My success is attributed to my family. It's about creating change and walking through doors so I can hold them open for others.



Aiden Wu

When Aiden Wu steps into a room, it's with the quiet strength of someone carrying not just his dreams, but the hopes of a community. As the 2025 Avant Foundation AIDA Bursary Recipient, Aiden isn't just studying medicine, he's on a mission to heal generational wounds, inspire future doctors, and bring cultural identity into clinical practice.

Aiden's story begins on Erub (Darnley Island), one of the eastern Torres Strait Islands. Though now his family is spread across Townsville, Cairns, and the Strait, the heart of his cultural identity remains firmly grounded in the blue waters and strong community of his homeland.

"The inequities my family and so many others have faced, are a part of what has shaped me," Aiden shares. "That knowledge drives my desire to make a difference. It's one of the reasons I study medicine, and it's what keeps me going."

What he's working toward isn't just a white coat and a stethoscope, it's a more equitable system, one where the next generation of Indigenous doctors, nurses, and health workers thrive.

Currently in the Doctor of Medicine program at the University of Queensland, Aiden's path has been shaped by a love for science and a passion for problem-solving – but more importantly, by his love for his community.

"I'm not just doing this for myself," he says. "My success is attributed to my family. It's about creating change and walking through doors so I can hold them open for others."

Volunteering at the Murri School Health Expo, shadowing doctors

at Thursday Island Hospital, and attending conferences like CATSINaM and NATSIEHC have offered Aiden both insight and inspiration. And his recent interest in ophthalmology, sparked by trailblazers like Dr. Kris Rallah-Baker and Shaun Tatipata at the Deadly Vision Centre, is proof that exposure fuels ambition.

Leadership, for Aiden, has never been about titles, it's about impact. Whether as School Captain in Townsville or as President at St John's College, he has continually chosen roles that create space for others.

"I see leadership as action-based," he explains. "It's rooted in community and focused on making space for future trailblazers."

As the 2025–2026 UQ AIDA Student Representative, he'll now be a voice for all Indigenous medical students across the university, by advocating, connecting, and amplifying student needs. In 2026, Aiden plans to tutor incoming med students, offer mentorship, and one day launch a bursary to support the next generation of Indigenous medical students.

### Medicine with heart: returning home to heal

Aiden's ultimate vision is to one day return to the Torres Strait for an elective placement, bringing his training full circle and giving back to the place that shaped him.

"Even as a student, I want to help my community in any way I can," he says.

That includes addressing one of the most pressing issues in Indigenous health today: health literacy.

"Better education leads to better

outcomes," he notes. "But we can't just deliver information, we need to build trust, tailor our communication, and truly connect with people."

Getting into medicine wasn't easy. Financial pressure, academic requirements, and limited access made the journey challenging. But Aiden isn't one to shy away from obstacles. With the support of Indigenous entry pathways at JCU and UQ, and encouragement from teachers and peers, he pushed through. Even now, he works casually and leans on family for support. The AIDA bursary, he says, will be life changing.

"It'll help me focus on my studies, travel home to reconnect with family and culture, and attend opportunities like conferences that enrich my journey," he says. "This bursary doesn't just support me; it helps me support others."

### Redefining equity in education and health

For Aiden, true accessibility means more than just being accepted into a course. It means not having to choose between culture and career, or between food and textbooks.

"Investing in Indigenous education and health is investing in Australia's future. When you support one of us, you're supporting many. We're collective. We lift each other."

Whether he ends up in eye health, rural medicine, or public health leadership, one thing is certain: his work will be grounded in community, inspired by culture, and driven by equality.

"Indigenous health equality is the baseline," he says. "It's where we start and it's where we must build from."

# Member Grants



## Driving medical progress: empowering members to lead and innovate

Avant Foundation's Member Grants program supports doctors at every stage of their career, especially those just starting out, to lead initiatives that advance healthcare knowledge, practice and education. Whether enhancing clinical skills, launching research or pioneering new models of care, these grants help evolve promising ideas into real-world impact.

Since its inception in 2012, Avant has awarded over \$5m in funding to a diverse range of research and development initiatives. From transplantation and oncology to maternal health and medical technology, these initiatives reflect the dedication and drive of Avant members to tackle pressing healthcare challenges.

With a tiered funding structure, from \$5,000 microgrants to \$50,000 research grants, the program offers scalable support for both emerging ideas and more complex studies. Its flexibility and accessibility encourage participation from early-career doctors, students and trainees, empowering them to grow their expertise and make meaningful contributions from the outset of their professional journey.

## Supporting all members, especially early-career doctors

Avant Foundation Member Grants aim to support doctors to pursue innovative research and career development projects. With a special focus on early-career doctors and medical students, these grants help members starting out on their research career to overcome funding barriers, expand their knowledge, hone their skills and contribute to improving healthcare across Australia.

The member grants available are:

- **\$50,000 grants** for research over 12 months
- **\$25,000 grants** for research over 12 months
- **Microgrants:** \$5,000 small grants or early-stage research, education, or career development.

## Eligibility

Avant members, including students, trainees, new fellows and medical practitioners are eligible to apply for all available member grants. Medical practices that hold a Practice Medical Indemnity Policy with Avant can also apply for member grants.

## Assessment framework

All applications are assessed using a structured, weighted framework designed to ensure fairness, transparency and alignment with Avant's strategic priorities. The evaluation process places emphasis on research excellence, innovation and real-world impact.

Key assessment criteria include:

- **Significance:** Potential to improve health outcomes, clinical practice or health system performance
- **Design:** Robust methodology, clearly defined objectives and a feasible project scope
- **Innovation:** Originality of the concept or application of new tools, technologies or models of care
- **Team capability:** Relevant qualifications, experience and institutional support to successfully deliver the project
- **Feasibility and sustainability:** Realistic budget and timeline, with potential for long-term impact and scalability.

While individual scores and panel deliberations remain confidential, applicants are encouraged to review the published criteria to strengthen future submissions.

## The Miss Lewis Award

Miss Elizabeth Lewis was a pioneering British-Australian neurologist and neurosurgeon, best known for her groundbreaking work in paediatric and spinal neurosurgery. She was one of the first women in her field to gain significant recognition, in an era when women in medicine were often underrepresented.

She became a long-time adviser to Avant, where she was instrumental in shaping the organisation's approach to supporting medical indemnity.

The Miss Lewis Award maintains her legacy by recognising outstanding innovation in healthcare. This award provides a \$5,000 bonus grant for the most outstanding grant application across all submissions and acknowledges the applicant's potential for exceptional contributions to healthcare.



## Annual grant cycle: key dates

- Applications open: March
- Applications close: June
- Review and assessment: June–October
- Recipients notified: November
- Award announcement: September

# Member Grants Judging Panel

## Large Member Grants



**Professor Nadia Badawi, Neonatologist**  
AM, PhD, FRCPI, FRACP, DCH, MSc, MBCh



**Emeritus Professor Amanda Barnard, General Practitioner**  
MBBS, FRACGP



**Associate Professor Nicole (Nikki) Bart, Cardiologist**  
MBBS (Hons), DPhil, FRACP



**Professor Wendy Brown, Bariatric Surgeon**  
MBBS (Hons), PhD, FRACS, FACS



**Dr Patrick Clancy, Senior Medical Adviser (Avant)**  
MBBS (Qld), FRACGP, MHLth&MedLaw (Melb)



**Professor Ian Incoll, Orthopaedic Surgeon**  
MBBS, FRACS (Orth), FAOrthA



**Dr Belinda Jackson, Gastroenterologist**  
MBBS (Hons), BBioMedSci (Hons), FRACP, PhD



**Professor Gulam Khandaker, Public Health Physician**  
MBBS, DCH, MPH, PhD, FAFPHM



**Emeritus Professor Kim Oates, Paediatrician**  
AO MD DSc MHP FRACP FRCP FAFPHM

## Microgrants



**Dr Reece Adler, Emergency Medicine, Registrar**  
BSc (Hons), MD



**Dr Hayley Barnes, Respiratory and Sleep Physician**  
MBBS, BBiomedSci (Hons), MPH, FRACP, PhD



**Dr Angelina Di Re, Surgeon**  
MBBS MS FRACS CSSANZ



**Dr Lauren Feitelson, General Practitioner**  
MBBS



**Dr Dinesh Palipana, Emergency Medicine, Registrar**  
MBBS, LLB, MD, OAM



**Dr Victoria Phan, General Practitioner**  
MBBS, MClin US, DCH



**Dr Dhivya Thangavel, Obstetrician and Gynaecologist**  
B. Med, M. Surg (Adv Gyn Surg), FRANZCOG, AATP

## Large Member Grant recipients

Applicants	Funding	Key focus
Dr Oneil Bhalala	\$50,000	Using liquid brain biopsies to study dementia with Lewy bodies
Ms Isabella Burdon	\$50,000	A metagenomic machine learning model for diagnostic and prognostic classification of chronic rhinosinusitis
Dr Antonia Clarke	\$25,000	Community, country and cognition: place-based healthy brain ageing for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait islander peoples
Dr Jessica Fairley	\$50,000	Harnessing the power of big data to understand heart disease in scleroderma
Dr John Farey	\$50,000	Dual mobility versus conventional total hip arthroplasty in femoral neck fractures, a registry-nested, open-label, cluster-randomised crossover trial (distinct)
Dr Emma Foster	\$50,000	Measuring outcomes beyond disease (MOBY-d): incorporating patient reported outcomes in epilepsy care through a consumer co-designed approach
Dr Laura Ross	\$50,000	Scarce: a cohort study of autoimmune and rare diseases and complications of the eye
Dr Emma Tay	\$25,000	Prescription drug monitoring program in New South Wales: a mixed methods study of implementation processes, stakeholder experiences and program impact
Dr Sidharth Vemuri	\$25,000	Enhancing relationship-centred complex decision-making
Dr Nelson Wang	\$50,000	Evidence-based prescribing for the empirical treatment of blood pressure and cholesterol
Dr Chloe Yap	\$25,000	Personalised prediction of serious and common antipsychotic side effects with genetics and big data

## \$5,000 Microgrant recipients

Funding	Key focus
Dr Juanita Chui	Perioperative mortality in renal transplant recipients. A nationwide study
Dr Brennan Collis	Targeted versus empiric perioperative antibiotic prophylaxis in solid organ transplant recipients colonised with multi-Dr.ug resistant organisms and the risk of postoperative multiDr.ug resistant infections
Dr Allyce Counsell	Towards the elimination of cervical cancer in Australia: reducing inequities in underserved populations through qualitative examination of the role of general practice in cervical cancer prevention pathways
Dr Karen Freilich	European society for sexual medicine (ESSM) school
Dr Tran Ngoc An Huynh	Improving quality of treatments in patients with bladder cancer at Monash Health
Miss Lydia Lam	Time-driven activity-based costing of performing an intravitreal injection in Australia
Dr Adrian Lee	The ABCs of Sjögren's disease: autoantibody-secreting b cells
Dr Melissa Lee	Cardiac magnetic resonance imaging in adult congenital heart disease: increasing Australia's clinical, education and research capacity
Dr Keeth Mayakaduwege	International survey of perinatal death education among healthcare students and providers
Dr Edward Meehan	Suicides by socioeconomic quintile in Australian cities and regional areas during the covid-19 pandemic: a time series analysis
Dr Jonathan O'Donnell	Improving care in paediatric inflammatory bowel disease in Australia, through precision medicine
Dr Magdalene Parkes	Up in the air: understanding paediatric influenza vaccination through the Australian immunisation registry
Dr Kyle Raubenheimer	Using target trial emulation to determine the causal effect of pre-arthroplasty bariatric surgery on complications in total hip arthroplasty and total knee arthroplasty
Dr Paul Sadleir	Feasibility of a multi-dose test-dose system for pre-operative antibiotics: a phase 1 trial.
Dr Laveniya Satgunaseelan	Ultra-rapid brain tumour diagnostics: a long read to a fast answer
Dr Katina Selvaraj	Intralesional triamcinolone acetonide for squamous cell carcinoma of the lower limbs
Dr Gabrielle Stokes	Zoledronic acid to mitigate bone loss following ischaemic stroke
Ms Hope Tanudisastro	Towards an inclusive genomics: characterising structural genetic variation in underrepresented groups
Dr Dumindu Weerakkody	Treatment of keloid scars with adjuvant radiotherapy before surgery
Dr Nikhil Dwivedi	Awareness and knowledge of Australian junior doctors and medical students about Hidradenitis suppurativa – research proposal
Dr Jane McKenzie	Closing the gap: review of common and unique factors influencing prostate cancer outcomes in two Indigenous populations.
Professor Anthony Harris	Factors affecting how Australian doctors view and use social media: a post-pandemic follow up national survey



Dr Chloe Yap,  
Miss Elizabeth Lewis recipient

Dr Chloe Yap is dedicated to reshaping psychiatric treatment by addressing one of the field's toughest challenges: the debilitating side effects of antipsychotic medications. These drugs are vital for treating severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, but they often come with life-altering side effects such as heart disease, diabetes and neurological issues. Dr Yap's research aims to predict which patients are at risk of these side effects, using genetics and big data, to create personalised treatment plans that minimise harm and improve outcomes.

With a PhD in autism and a background in psychiatric genomics, Dr Yap transitioned to general adult psychiatry, where her frustration with the 'trial and error' approach to prescribing antipsychotics fuelled her desire for change. "My research aims to use genetic data to predict which individuals will experience side effects," Dr Yap explains. "By identifying risks early, we can tailor treatment plans to improve patient wellbeing."

Central to her work is biobanking – large-scale collections of biological samples and detailed health data from large groups of participants.

## Revolutionising psychiatric care with personalised medicine.

By analysing this data, Dr Yap hopes to uncover patterns that may help predict side effects and personalise treatments. Her current project uses the UK Biobank, which includes data from over 2,500 individuals with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, to explore how genetic factors influence the development of side effects.

Dr Yap credits her mentors, Professors Naomi Wray, Jacob Gratten, Dan Siskind and Nicola Warren, for their guidance as she shifts from basic research to developing practical, clinical applications. Supported by an Avant Member Grant, which she commended for its strong backing of early-career researchers, Dr Yap is taking her work to the next level. "Avant Member Grants are invaluable for clinicians like me trying to balance research with clinical training," she says.

Dr Yap has been honoured with this year's prestigious Miss Lewis Award for the most exceptional grant application within the cohort. This award includes an additional \$5,000 on top of the grant funding. Named in honour of Miss Elizabeth Lewis, a trailblazer in paediatric and spinal neurosurgery, the award celebrates her lifelong dedication to medicine. As a long-time

medical adviser at Avant, Miss Lewis mentored numerous doctors, offering invaluable guidance, support and advocacy throughout her career. The Miss Lewis Award acknowledges remarkable innovation within the grant cohort, with all successful applicants being considered for this recognition, which is ultimately determined at the judges' discretion.

In the short term, Dr Yap is enhancing her skills in study design and ethics. Long term, she hopes to implement personalised prescribing strategies in clinical practice to improve quality of life for patients with severe mental illnesses.

Her ultimate goal is to shift psychiatry away from subjective diagnoses toward more objective, personalised treatments based on biomarkers. "If successful, this could change how we approach mental health care," Dr Yap says.

Excited about the potential impact of her research, Dr Yap plans to share her findings at major psychiatric conferences and through public outreach. Her advice to fellow researchers is to "look for the clinical problems that frustrate you. Those are often the areas where your research can make the biggest difference."

“

My research aims to use genetic data to predict which individuals will experience side effects. By identifying risks early, we can tailor treatment plans to improve patient wellbeing.



Visit [avant.org.au/foundation](https://avant.org.au/foundation)  
for application information.



Associate Professor Fiona Brownfoot  
MBBS, FRANZCOG, PhD.

## Past Member Grant Recipient Where are they now?

### Associate Professor's Fiona Brownfoot: Investigating novel treatments for pre-eclampsia

In 2013, PhD candidate and Avant member, Fiona Brownfoot, received her first-ever research grant from Avant. At the time, she was deep into her doctoral studies at the University of Melbourne, investigating novel treatments for preeclampsia, a life-threatening pregnancy complication with no effective cure. That early support helped her career to flourish at the intersection of clinical care, translational science and innovation.

Today, Associate Professor Fiona Brownfoot is a leading obstetrician-scientist based in Melbourne. She holds a specialist appointment at Epworth Freemasons Hospital and an academic position at the University of Melbourne, where she continues to push the boundaries of maternal-foetal medicine. Her work is internationally recognised, with over 80 peer-reviewed publications and numerous national and international awards to her name.

Fiona's research has remained focused on improving outcomes for mothers and babies. Her early work identified safe, repurposed medications such as metformin and sulfasalazine, which may help stabilise preeclampsia, offering hope for a condition that affects thousands of pregnancies each year. More recently, she has expanded her focus to include biomedical engineering, leading a multidisciplinary team developing novel devices to better detect foetal distress and improve pregnancy outcomes.

Despite her many achievements, Fiona remains grounded in her clinical practice. She is known for her compassionate, patient-centred approach, caring for women with both routine and high-risk pregnancies. Her clinical experience continues to inform her research, ensuring that the innovations she develops are not only scientifically sound but also practical and applicable in real-world settings.

Reflecting on her journey, Fiona credits that first Avant Foundation grant as a pivotal moment. "It gave me the confidence to pursue research seriously," she says. "It wasn't just the funding; it was the recognition that what I was working on mattered."

That ethos, supporting early-career researchers with bold ideas, remains central to the Avant Foundation's mission today. Fiona's story is a powerful example of what can happen when promising clinicians are given the opportunity to explore, innovate and lead.



Medicine is changing. We need to think not just about individual patients, but about the systems that support them. That's where real transformation happens.

Now, more than a decade later, Fiona is paying it forward. She mentors medical students and junior doctors, many of whom are just beginning to explore research. She also continues to collaborate with colleagues across disciplines, championing a systems-based approach to maternal care that aligns closely with the Foundation's evolving focus on health systems safety.

"Medicine is changing," she says. "We need to think not just about individual patients, but about the systems that support them. That's where real transformation happens."

From a promising PhD student to a national leader in obstetric innovation, Associate Professor Fiona Brownfoot exemplifies the long-term impact of early investment in medical research. Her journey is a testament to the power of curiosity, compassion and the right support at the right time.

## Advancing dementia prevention in rural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



Dr Antonia Clarke

Dr Antonia Clarke's career has been anything but conventional. Initially trained in law and advocating for social justice and human rights, she later transitioned to neurology with a focus on dementia prevention and care. This shift was driven by a desire to make a tangible difference in healthcare, especially for underserved communities. As a medical student and junior doctor, Dr Clarke worked across rural and remote New South Wales, from Dubbo to Broken Hill and Lismore. She experienced the challenges of healthcare delivery in these regions, and the importance of healthcare for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that includes family, community and culture.

Her current research focuses on dementia prevention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly in rural and remote areas. "While working with Aboriginal communities, it became clear that prevention was a critical area of interest. Community members wanted to understand how cognitive decline could be delayed or prevented," Dr Clarke explains. This insight led to a shift toward dementia prevention grounded in community strengths, rather than just focusing on service delivery.

Dr Clarke's research is guided by community input, with Aboriginal colleagues and community members shaping the project. This

collaborative approach has led to a more holistic, community-centred focus on dementia care and prevention. A key lesson she's learned is the importance of respecting community timeframes and building trust gradually and authentically, understanding that there may be times when it's not the right moment to engage.

Her work aims to address gaps in dementia research, particularly in relation to structural and socioeconomic influences on the disease. "While much can be done to modify risk factors, the bigger challenge lies in addressing the underlying socioeconomic and structural factors that contribute to dementia risk," she says. By focusing on the concept of 'place,' Dr Clarke emphasises the importance of community strengths in dementia prevention, especially in rural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with the goal of creating policies that bridge existing knowledge gaps.

An Avant Member Grant has been instrumental in supporting Dr Clarke's research, helping ensure ethical, community-centred practices. "Avant Foundation's goal of advancing transformative change in medical practice aligns with my aim to improve dementia prevention and care," she says. The grant has enabled Dr Clarke's team to return to the communities

involved, helping ensure their findings are accurately represented and feedback is incorporated. Additionally, the grant can fund the commissioning of artwork to visually represent the research results, an idea that emerged from community consultations.

For those considering applying for an Avant Member Grant, Dr Clarke advises, "Think about how medical practice might be changed or renewed by your research. An Avant Member Grant gives you the opportunity to nurture an idea and see it come to fruition."

She also emphasises the need for flexibility in research, especially when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. "Support for long-term, flexible timelines is essential for building trust and conducting ethical, community-centred research."

Looking ahead, Dr Clarke envisions her research influencing policy and practice by addressing the structural factors contributing to dementia risk, and promoting community-led, culturally sensitive approaches to dementia care. Ultimately, she hopes her work will contribute to more equitable health outcomes, and influence dementia care practices in rural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



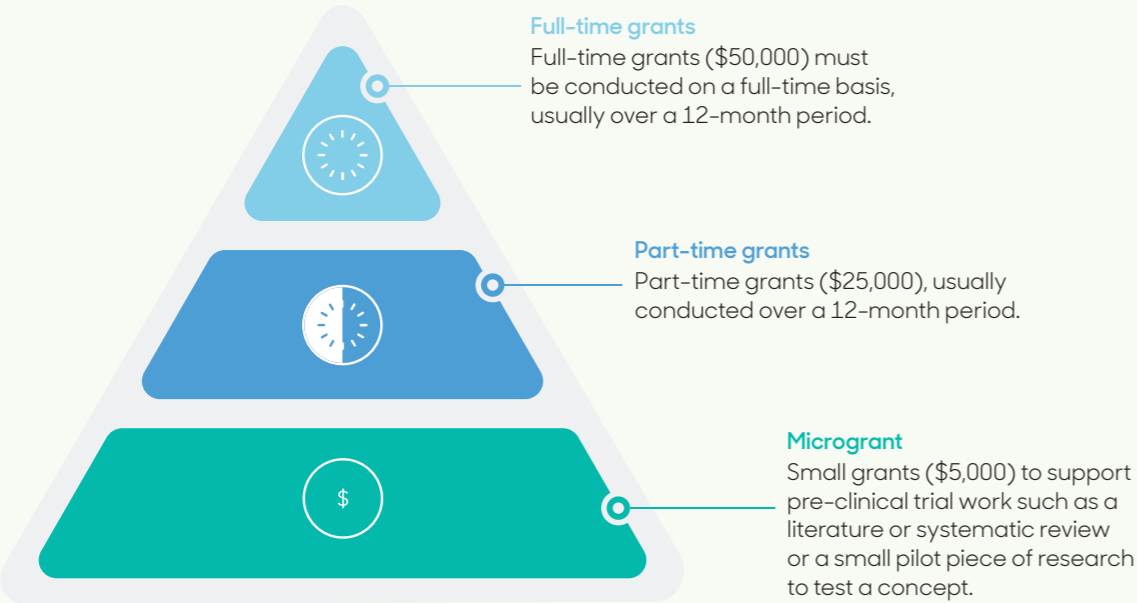
Support for long-term, flexible timelines is essential for building trust and conducting ethical, community-centred research.

# Member Grants Impact Summary

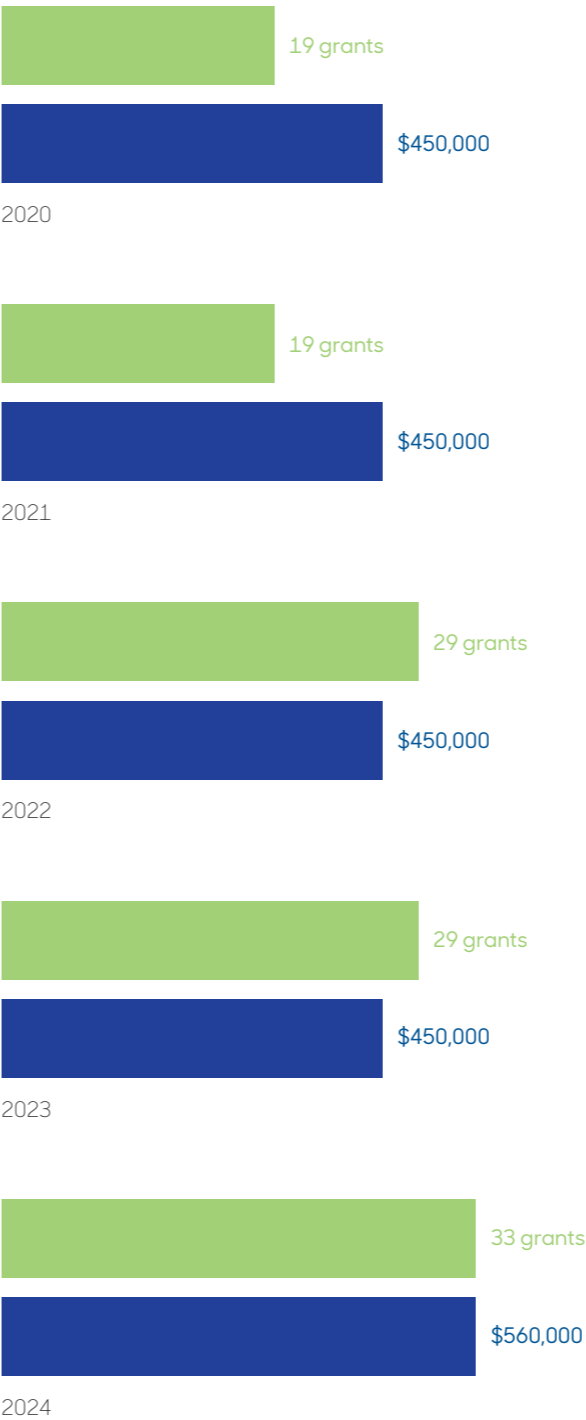
Member Grant  
Program



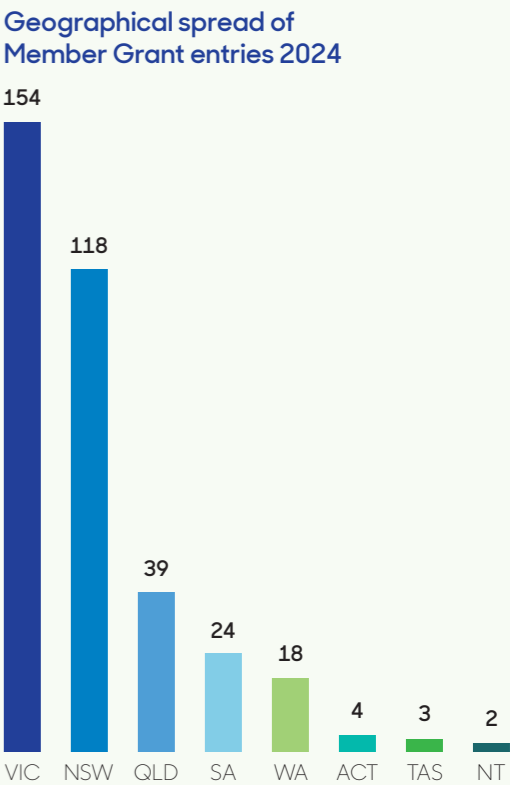
Structure of the Member Grant  
Research Program in 2025



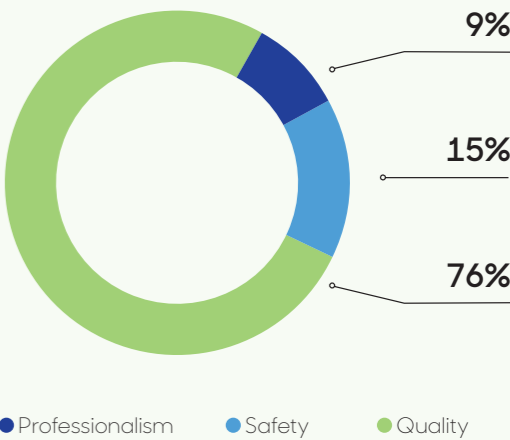
## Member Grants by year



## Member Grant responses



## Member Grants - Sub-categories



# Avant Legacy series: Celebrating distinguished members

## A life of reason and compassion: The legacy of Professor John Dwyer, AO

Few figures in Australian healthcare have shaped the system with the insight, integrity, and impact of Professor John Dwyer, AO. A long-standing member of Avant and a towering figure in public health and medical science, his career has paralleled – and profoundly influenced – the evolution of modern Australian medicine.

Professor Dwyer's journey began in the intensive care unit at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, where, as a recently graduated doctor, he witnessed a historic moment: Australia's first heart transplant, led by the renowned Dr Harry Windsor. The transplant's ultimate failure due to immune rejection sparked a lifelong passion in Dwyer to understand the immune system – how the body identifies and responds to foreign invaders.

He soon took up research at the Garvan Institute before pursuing a PhD at Melbourne's Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. "That was the start of a career studying just how these little cells could recognise something foreign and go about attacking it," he recalls.

This early fascination with immunology would place Dwyer on the front lines of a medical crisis that would change the world. Moving to the United States, he found himself among the first physicians to treat patients affected by the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic.

"We were suddenly faced with patients who were so ill, but we just couldn't make a diagnosis," he says. "What I learned firsthand from that experience was about discrimination – and that really affected me. It changed me a lot."

His years in the U.S. gave him a first-hand view of the devastating inequities of an uncoordinated, privatised health system. "There were superb clinicians and facilities, but no national system, and many people were left without care. It was distressing."

Returning to Australia in the mid-1980s, he brought with him a sharpened sense of purpose. At the University of New South Wales and Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital, he led efforts to develop humane, evidence-based responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis – advocating for science over fear, compassion over stigma.

Professor Dwyer has never been one to stay silent. As founding president of Friends of Science in Medicine, he became a leading voice in the fight against unproven and pseudoscientific treatments. From homeopathy to "detox" fads and dubious university health courses, he called out the dangers of straying from evidence-based care.

"Medicine must be rooted in rigorous science," he argued. "Otherwise, we risk losing its soul."

That conviction has defined his career – and won him both praise and controversy. But his contributions speak for themselves: more than 180 peer-reviewed publications, several influential books, and recognition as an Officer of the Order of Australia. His name now graces the John Dwyer Lecture Theatre, a symbol of his enduring legacy in medical education.

A prominent member of Avant Mutual, Professor Dwyer also brings his wisdom to bear on medical indemnity and professional standards, helping safeguard both the rights of doctors and the wellbeing of patients.

But perhaps his greatest legacy is less tangible: a culture of critical thinking, scientific integrity, and moral courage. Through every role – as physician, researcher, advocate, and educator – Professor John Dwyer reminds us that medicine is, above all, a human endeavour. And one that must never lose sight of either reason or compassion.



Medicine must be rooted in rigorous science. Otherwise, we risk losing its soul.

# Chief Medical Officer's Message

## Looking to the future: a systems approach to safer healthcare

Over the next few years, the new Avant Foundation will continue to evolve its mission to create transformational change in healthcare. Building on the strong foundations laid in our inaugural year, we are now refining our focus towards one of the most pressing challenges in modern medicine: health systems safety.

While each individual clinician's commitment to high quality care remains essential, it is increasingly clear that the safety and quality of care cannot rest solely on practitioners. The systems in which doctors work, across hospitals, clinics and community settings, must be designed to support safety, reduce variability and foster institutional resilience. Truly safe systems are those that remain robust even in the face of error-creating conditions.

Our strategic pillars of safety, quality, professionalism, equity and sustainability remain unchanged, but this year, we begin a journey of proactive engagement with experts and institutions to better understand and influence the systems that shape clinical practice and patient outcomes. This includes organisations such as the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, peak bodies, academic centres of excellence and frontline clinicians. These relationships will help us align our funding and efforts with the most effective research and innovation in systems safety.

This evolution will also be reflected by a shift in how we fund. The Foundation is moving towards a more collaborative, outcomes-focused model. One that leverages Avant's unique insights, including medico-legal data and member feedback. At the same time, we are committed to strengthening our grant-making processes to reflect best practice in medical research philanthropy.

Effective funding must be grounded in fairness, clarity, efficiency, purpose and impact. That means transparent criteria, streamlined applications and meaningful feedback when requested, especially for early-career researchers. We are working to ensure our review panels are diverse and inclusive, representing a range of specialties, research experience and Avant members. And we are committed to learning from those we fund, using feedback and data to refine our approach over time.

These principles are strategic, not just operational. They reflect our belief that how the Foundation funds is just as important as what we fund. By embedding them into our processes, we aim to build trust, reduce barriers and ensure our resources support the most promising people and their ideas.

The year ahead promises to be an exciting one. With a renewed focus on systems-level safety and a commitment to best practice philanthropy, the Avant Foundation is well-positioned to make a lasting impact on Australian healthcare. I look forward to working with my team, our Foundation Committee, members, partners and the broader research community to realise this vision.

**Professor Steve Robson**  
Chief Medical Officer, Avant  
Obstetrician and Gynaecologist



The year ahead promises to be an exciting one. With a renewed focus on systems-level safety and a commitment to best practice philanthropy, the Avant Foundation is well-positioned to make a lasting impact on Australian healthcare.

## Contact us

[avant.org.au/foundation](http://avant.org.au/foundation)

