

New director at the Kirby Institute

Professor Tony Kelleher will bring his own vision to the Kirby Institute, while continuing the legacy and achievements of his legendary predecessor ...

PROFESSOR Anthony Kelleher doesn't need reminding of the size of the shoes he is filling as the new Director of the Kirby Institute at UNSW Sydney.

The Kirby's legendary inaugural and long-time director, Scientia Professor David Cooper AC died in March 2018 after a short battle with a rare autoinflammatory disease.

"I'm under no illusions about the size of the shoes," Professor Kelleher tells the *MJA*.

"My relationship with David goes back many, many years, so I'm well aware of his achievements and his legacy. I don't think it's intimidating, but it's certainly a huge challenge."

Professor Kelleher has been with the Kirby Institute since 2001 as Head of its Immunovirology and Pathogenesis Program. He hopes to be able to maintain that position while overseeing the "bigger picture", at least in the interim.

"I want to continue to lead certain aspects of the laboratory research there," he says. "I'm very passionate about the HIV research my team is conducting in our laboratories. There are projects we're working on that are ongoing. They have the potential to really inform future HIV treatment. We've just been awarded an NHMRC program grant to explore novel approaches to HIV vaccines, inducing remission and minimising the morbidity of co-infections with a team of leading Australian researchers that I have worked with for many years. That's a great opportunity to continue my own research interests while driving the research agenda of the Kirby as a whole.

"I will play a lesser role in the laboratory, but I'm not going walk away from that just yet."

Professor Kelleher's interest in immunology, virology and

research generally was sparked as a teenager thanks to his father.

"I know it sounds a bit geeky, but my father was an economist and he used to get a range of magazines that were circulated through the Reserve Bank of Australia, including *The Economist*, the *New Statesman*, and *Scientific American*.

"He passed these by me, and I can remember in about Year 10 or 11 reading an article by Cesar Milstein, who was the guy that came up with monoclonal antibodies.

"He was intrigued by their potential as therapeutics, which he foresaw at that very early stage. The potential of monoclonal antibodies has only really come to fruition in the last decade, but Cesar saw the potential at that point.

"I was intrigued by this article in *Scientific American* and I guess it sparked something. I was always quite interested in science at school and thought that immunology was interesting. So, I then pursued a science/medicine degree at the University of New South Wales the first year it was offered."

Professor Kelleher ended up doing his Honours year under the guidance of Professor Ron Penny — who together with Professor David Cooper made the first HIV/AIDS diagnosis in Australia in the early 80s — at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. He was the HIV registrar there in 1991 — "possibly one of the worst years of the epidemic".

"With all the best intentions we were doing very badly at [figuring out how to treat HIV/AIDS]. People were getting absolutely top-notch care, but it was really just all palliation, and putting out fires," he says.

"There was an urgent need to do something. It struck me that we had to be able to do better than we were doing and St Vincent's was

such an epicentre at that stage.

"I had opportunities placed in front of me, and I could see potential areas where we could fight this terrible virus."

Times have changed, of course, and the Kirby Institute's role has changed as well from its early days as the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research when it focused very much on HIV.

"It was very HIV focused but it moved into other areas — initially hepatitis C and hepatitis B because of the coinfections that occurred [in HIV patients] and the patient populations at risk," says Professor Kelleher.

"David and [Scientia Professor] Greg Dore [Head of the Kirby's Viral Hepatitis Clinical Research Program] saw a need for research there. We grew from a centre that was focused on doing trials in Australia to an institute that did clinical trials on the global stage.

"From there the Institute grew again organically into sexually transmitted infections, and then through that into Aboriginal health, because of the challenge of addressing STIs in Aboriginal communities.

"[The Kirby] has evolved into spaces where there is a need for high quality research — where we can rapidly extend our expertise and the learning that we've gained into those complementary strategically important areas."

The Kirby has also grown into an excellent nursery for talented researchers, he said.

"It's been a great place for developing people. We have program heads who started at the Kirby as students, and are now



"He will have new scientific worlds to conquer. He will dream new dreams. And he will take us all with him on the journey."

internationally recognised leaders in their field.”

Human papillomavirus and tuberculosis are international areas in which Professor Kelleher can see the Kirby Institute being influential in coming years.

The last word goes to the Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG, the patron of the Kirby Institute.

“[Tony Kelleher] is the perfect person to continue the vision for the Kirby Institute pioneered by its first Director, Professor David Cooper: pushing the boundaries of science, engaging with the communities and patients most affected, cooperating with other nations, exploring the links between targeting infections and upholding human rights,” he said.

“But Tony Kelleher is his own person. He will have new scientific worlds to conquer. He will dream new dreams. And he will take us all with him on the journey. That is the way of world class medical research today.”

Cate Swannell

doi: 10.5694/mja2.50055