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FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

From humble beginnings 30 years ago, the Skin and Cancer Foundation has grown to be the largest organisation of its type in the world. By **Nikki Stefanoff**

Chris Arnold is passionate about healthcare. As Executive Director of the Melbourne-based Skin and Cancer Foundation Inc, his seat on a number of boards, such as BioGrid Australia, and his work as Chairman of the UNESCO and WHO (World Health Organisation) affiliated Global Variome Ltd, Arnold is someone who most certainly walks the talk.

His belief in the provision of quality healthcare for all is apparent, as is his commitment to working philanthropically and with a community focus.

“Melbourne has been good to me over my career,” he says. “And while I believe that it’s important to give 100 percent to the day job, giving something back to the people of Australia is integral to my belief system. It’s what I strive for in all I do on a personal level and it’s the core principle of the work we do here at the Skin and Cancer Foundation.”

In 2017 the Skin and Cancer Foundation will celebrate its 30th year. “We’ve come a long way,” Arnold laughs. “I started working here seven years ago, but the Foundation itself began in the 80s amid rumours circulating that the

Government was stopping the funding used to train dermatologists in public hospitals. In response, a group of 37 Victoria-based dermatologists got together and each chipped in \$1000 to set it up. Thirty years later we have an annual turnover of \$7 million.”

It’s not only the turnover that’s impressive: what the Foundation does is extraordinary and rare. It is one of only three of its kind in the world. “We are the largest diversified dermatology facility in the southern hemisphere,” says Arnold. “The National Skin Centre in Singapore and the Charité hospital in Berlin are larger and, unlike the Foundation, supported by governments. We are all different but what we all have in common is that we’re each supporting our country’s dermatologists the best way we can, through clinics, research and education.”

As the name suggests, Skin and Cancer Foundation Inc is focused on supporting those who suffer from skin conditions such as psoriasis, as well as people dealing with melanoma. This includes early detection.

“We are a not-for-profit organisation. Our goal is to always be supporting the general

public and Australia’s health practitioners, something we do in a number of different ways,” Arnold explains. “We operate 28 subspecialty clinics in dermatology and six surgical theatres run by 53 dermatologists, eight plastic surgeons, an oral mucosal specialist, a psychologist and a psychiatrist, backed by highly skilled nursing and administrative teams.

As well as this, the Foundation conducts professional education sessions for dermatologists and registrars, masterclasses for those treating psoriasis patients with biologic drugs as well as workshop training to upskill general practitioners and nurses in skin health.

The Foundation runs a comprehensive monthly education program for dermatologists and registrars. The program is funded by untied grants, meaning that pharmaceutical companies have no say in what’s on the agenda or who speaks. With generous support from the Macquarie Foundation, sessions are now webcast to dermatologists and registrars across Australia, New Zealand and Singapore.

The Foundation is considered a world leader when it comes to the clinical treatment of psoriasis, led by Associate Professors Peter

Foley and Chris Baker. With 1500 people on their Australasian Psoriasis Registry, the duo is regularly called upon to assist in researching and publishing papers.

The springboard for the Foundation's existence, the training of Victorian registrars, is still seen as one of its core strengths. "Dermatologists are extremely well trained," Arnold says. "They have a medical degree, do a residency in a hospital and then complete a four-year specialisation in dermatology. They then have the opportunity to do an extra fifth year of enhanced surgery skills using Mohs micrographic technique. The Foundation provides dedicated space, library and resources for the registrars.

"Our biologics masterclasses are a fantastic way of updating health professionals about psoriasis treatments and changes with new drugs on the market and, in particular, the research surrounding their success," he says.

Research is the third major arm to the Foundation. It conducts global clinical trials under Associate Professor Peter Foley. It also supports researchers directly.

Occupational dermatology is an important clinical service. Associate Professor Rosemary Nixon is the only dual-qualified occupational physician and dermatologist in Australia and is regarded as a world-leader in occupational contact dermatitis. She established the first dedicated occupational dermatology clinic in Australasia and the Occupational Dermatology Research and Education Centre, based at the Foundation, subsequently mentoring many young dermatologists in this field.

Her team also established the Foundation's Contact Allergen Bank, which posts pre-prepared skin patch tests to dermatologists to facilitate the diagnosis of skin allergies.

Nixon also established the Foundation's corporate skin health program. "Our corporate skin health program is an important focus point for us in 2017," she says. "More Australians die from skin cancer each year than are killed on the road and we want to make it as easy as possible for them to get themselves checked out.

"We send qualified dermatologists to speak to staff, which means they are assessing all kinds of skin conditions, as well as doing the standard mole checks," says Nixon.

"To us it makes sense from all perspectives, as healthy employees are happy and productive."

Helping others is something Arnold looks to do in his personal life as well as in business. This, combined with a love of classical music, is how he and wife, Margot Costanzo, became involved in funding composer Elena Kats-Chernin's first piano quintet *The Offering*, premiered by the Flinders Quartet and pianist Ben Martin.

The Offering seems to be the perfect way to sum up the Skin and Cancer Foundation's work – a place where everyone is offering something. From the dermatologists and plastic surgeons to the psychologists and educators, their skills and time are being offered either pro bono or at reduced fees.

"The Foundation only works because of them," says Arnold.

"Our successes are because of the support they give us by donating their time to educate and train their colleagues or conduct research. It's a unique community and my colleagues and I are proud to play a part in it." ▀

To find out how you can support the inspiring work of the Skin & Cancer Foundation Inc, please visit www.skincancer.asn.au

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ABOUT MELBOURNE

CHRIS ARNOLD

"Melbourne represents the best of the world in one place. It's a melting pot of cultures, science, food and wine, the arts and music and has wonderful gardens. All with a great climate!"