

Professor Susan Clark

For as long as cancer has been around, the quest to find a cure has been the holy grail of medicine. The urgency becomes ever more pronounced as deaths from cancer escalate, more causal links are discovered and new types emerge. Yes, we have health programs in place; awareness is high; testing and treatment is available and survival rates are better. But there is no cure and a diagnosis of cancer is terrifying to hear.

Enter Professor Susan Clark. Over the past 20 years, Susan has made major contributions to cancer research that have earned her an enviable reputation in Australia and internationally. Of particular importance has been the critical role she has played in putting the new field of epigenetics on the scientific and medical map.

Basically, epigenetics is about modifications that involve changes in the gene patterns but not in the DNA itself. Based on her work, it has become apparent that this process is responsible for switching genes on and off without damaging them, and that this is vital for both the normal development of cells... and for the onset of common cancers like those of the breast, colon and prostate.

How can Susan's achievements be measured? She has developed an epigenetic test known internationally as the gold standard of its kind. She has patented a novel test for detecting prostate cancer using this technique. She has published over 80 articles, received dozens of awards, numerous invitations to speak at international conferences, and secured substantial Australian and overseas funding for the centre she founded, the Australian Epigenome Alliance.

Among all this, Susan has raised a family and finds time to regularly talk about her work to the community through media interviews, public lectures and, on a more personal level, as a Rotary speaker on prostate cancer awareness and talks to school children. It's difficult to communicate science to the masses at the best of times, more so when you're in a field as highly specialised as Susan's. But she has that rare gift of conveying the complex without complication.

It's a comforting thought that in this sport-loving country where cricketers and swimmers are idolized, the majority of Australians of the Year are actually drawn from the sciences and medicine. Susan is one of those scientists whose work has already made a profound impact on people's lives and will continue to do so.

By the way, she also won the German Science Prize which, since 1970, has recognized the work of only 27 world-renowned scientists – four of whom have gone on to win the Nobel Prize. So, when you hear about Susan collecting that honour, remember...you saw her here first! In the meantime, Rotary is delighted to get the jump on Norway.