**Time to ‘Shake It Up’: boosting research into Parkinson’s disease**

Parkinson’s disease is a degenerative disease of the nervous system that affects more than 110,000 Australians but it is only now receiving much-needed funding and research attention.

Parkinson’s disease affects more Australians than prostate, bowel and breast cancer, yet there are no treatments to slow, stop, or reverse the disease.

However, there is growing hope with several promising lines of research underway, says Simon Lewis, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Sydney and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

“In the last 20 years I’ve been around Parkinson’s, there’s been nothing except fine-tuning the symptom-relieving treatments that we have – tablets, injections, patches, surgeries. It’s only in the last two years that people have got serious about doing the trials.”

Vicki Miller, Executive General Manager of Strategic Partnerships at the Shake It Up Australia Foundation, says fast-tracking promising research that can slow or stop the progression of the disease is crucial.

“For anyone who’s been diagnosed with it or is watching a loved one living with it, if they knew they weren’t going to get any worse than they are today, they can live with that outcome.”

The reason is uncertainty. More than 110,000 Australians suffer from the complex movement disorder with each affected differently.

“You can’t give someone a crystal ball to show what their future’s going to look like,” Miller says. “They might live comfortably with Parkinson’s for the next 10 or 20 years or they might decline really quickly and be unable to move unaided. It affects their speech so they can’t talk; a lot of people end up in wheelchairs unable to feed themselves.”

The Shake It Up Australia Foundation was set-up by successful business owner Clyde Campbell, who was diagnosed at the age of 44, to raise awareness and boost research funding.

All funds raised go towards research (Clyde and his brother Greg personally fund the Foundation’s administrative costs) while a partnership with The Michael J. Fox Foundation means it co-funds many Australian research projects on a 50/50 basis.

Fox, the star of films such as Back to the Future and TV series Spin City, was diagnosed with Parkinson’s at the height of his Hollywood career in 1991, aged just 29 (about 10% of Parkinson’s cases are diagnosed under the age of 40).

A number of other high-profile cases have also brought attention to the disease including boxer Muhammad Ali and, more recently, singer-songwriter Neil Diamond and actor Alan Alda.

Professor Simon Lewis says there is no strong evidence that lifestyle factors cause Parkinson’s while genetic risk factors are rare.

However, existing drugs used to treat other diseases are now being trialled because some appear to have a positive impact on Parkinson’s sufferers. For example, a recent trial repurposing an existing treatment for diabetes has shown promise and will be the focus of a future international trial.

“In my working lifetime there’s probably been one major stand-out success that the medical world has made and that’s the fight against HIV,” Lewis says.

“When it came along we thought we had no chance and now we talk about vaccinations and living a normal life. It happened because there was a co-ordinated effort across the globe by governments with a lot of money saying we had to do something.”

Donations to the Shake It Up Foundation can be made at shakeitup.org.au.