

Professor Eric Morand MBBS (Hons) FRACP PhD FAHMS
Sub-Faculty of Clinical and Molecular Medicine

22 April 2026

Mr Eric Gittins,
c/- Lions Club Victoria

Dear Eric

It is a pleasure to provide you and your members with a report summarising the progress being made in the Rheumatology research with the support of the Lions Rheumatism & Arthritis Medical Research Foundation. As you know the Foundation has supported rheumatology research at Monash over more than a decade, and we are extremely grateful for the connection with you and your members as well as for the direct and meaningful contribution to our work that your support represents.

I am proud to be able to report significant progress since my last report to you.

One of our most significant projects is that led by Sarah Jones, recently promoted to Associate Professor in recognition of her contributions to the field and to Monash. A/Prof Jones' lab studies the actions of steroids, with the long term goal of finding a medicine to replace steroids by exploiting natural mechanisms that separate their beneficial effects from their harmful effects. A/Prof Jones generated >\$1M funding from a pre-commercialisation fund, Cureator, which has allowed her team to discover the first prototypes of this future drug. This breakthrough has been recognised with her work being shortlisted for a \$10M Medical Research Futures Fund (MRFF) Frontiers award; interviews took place in March 2026 and the outcome will be known by the end of the financial year. While details are not permitted to be shared, I can also report that A/Prof Jones has successfully formed a consortium of leading investors to directly invest into this project the resources it will take to advance the work to a pill available to Australians and to arthritis patients around the world. Foundation funds directly support A/Prof Jones' PhD Student Kunyu Zheng who is studying the function of proteins that maintain remission in rheumatic disease, which we think are central to long term cure.

In the adjacent lab led by A/Prof Josh Ooi, work has advanced on a concept that could one day actually cure rheumatoid arthritis. His colleague Dr Yi Tian Ting has solved the molecular structure of the interface between the immune system and the altered proteins that trigger rheumatoid arthritis. This is on a path to develop a method of treatment in which a patient's own cells are 'retrained' to convert disease-causing immune reactions to disease-stopping reactions – potentially stopping RA in its tracks without any generalised suppression of the immune system. Major grant funding applications are underway to try to elevate this project to the level needed to take it to the next level.

At the clinical level, Monash will shortly commence enrolling patients into a near world-first study in RA of an antibody medicine called a TCE (T cell engager). This technology holds the promise of potential cure for diseases driven by 'B cells', a class of white blood cell, and is perhaps the 'hottest' area of new medicine development worldwide today. Monash will be able to offer this treatment to patients in a phase 1 trial, uniquely one in which all patients receive the active medicine, and results of which will speed development of this type of product across the rheumatic disease spectrum. This trial is planned to open in June 2026 and is one of the most exciting opportunities for clinical trials for both us as investigators and for patients who may benefit.

In short, it has been a highly productive period since our last report to you; indeed the summary above does not capture even half of the activity in our department. On a personal level I am proud to report that I have been appointed as a Sir John Monash Distinguished Professor, the highest honour offered by my University and in 2026 have started a five year NH&MRC Investigator grant at Level 3, the highest level of NHMRC funding available. These honours both enable me to continue to lead our work but also recognise the privilege I have to lead such an outstanding group of scientists working to improve the lives of people living with rheumatic disease.

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I look forward to continuing the productive relationship with Foundation into the future and to reporting back with continued exciting news.

Sincerely,



Eric Morand FAHMS
Sir John Monash Distinguished Professor, Monash University
Head, Rheumatology, Monash Health