



THE MAD MINUTE

with **VASSO APOSTOLOPOULOS**

Scientist



Associate professor Vasso Apostolopoulos says the search for a cure for cancer has been a lifelong passion.

Q. What is your role at the Austin Research Centre?

A. I'm the head of the Immunology and Vaccine Laboratory there. We're working on developing a vaccine for cancer and new ways of delivering the vaccine and getting it working. Our main focus is breast cancer, but we also work on others such as lung, colon, ovarian and prostate cancer. We're also extending our findings and our testing methods. We have a cancer vaccine that we developed in the lab about 10 years ago that is in clinical trials being tested on humans. Now we're using the same method to try and develop vaccines for other diseases such as multiple sclerosis, diabetes and some infectious diseases.

Q. You're fairly young to be the head of a research department. How did you get into the role?

A. I guess all the cancer vaccine studies here were originated by my work. I did my PhD at the institute where I am now and basically it was a side project. I started off doing my research on cancer, but then decided to focus on developing a vaccine for cancer. The work's been so successful that we've got a lot of people working in the lab and I guess because I've worked on this project since the beginning and helped establish the lab it was a natural progression to take it over.

Q. You've been awarded several accolades including Victorian of the Year, and Woman of the Year in Greece. What does that feel like?

A. I never expected to get them. But I've been so fortunate that the work has been successful and that we're getting results and good responses. It's actually exciting getting the awards. All the late nights you spend in the lab, you actually are getting recognition for.

Q. What kind of process did you go through when you were developing a vaccine?

A. We did a lot of reading and then came up with ideas of what could possibly work and what would boost the immune system. I tried a number of different ideas before I settled on the one we're using now.

Q. Do you think we'll ever find a cure for cancer?

A. In the past 10 years medical research and technology have advanced, and we know a lot more today. I am sure that in the next five to 10 years we will know a lot more than we do now and we will get more ideas and more proof of how to combat a lot of diseases, including cancer. From what we're doing at the moment, we know we're on the right track and we also know that from other research around the world. We can see some sort of responses in patients and we just have to keep working at it and try and improve on what we have.

Q. What is the biggest health risk at the moment?

A. Cancer is pretty major. One in three people will become infected with some type of cancer. Heart disease is another major one because of a rise in obesity.

Q. We hear a lot of miracle stories about cancer. Is there anything we can do to prevent it?

A. There is evidence of people who have found certain things that work in certain ways. But in terms of the right diet, there are a lot of chemicals in food that detracts from their overall goodness anyway.

Q. How advanced is your work on other cancer vaccines?

A. We're looking at vaccines for colon, ovarian and lung cancer. The same one we're using at the moment is being trialled on these types of cancer as well.

Q. Do you get a lot of volunteers for the clinical trials?

A. Yes. Everybody is looking to get help in any way possible.

— with SARAH WOTHERSPOON