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Australians of the Year Ian Frazer and Fiona Wood to Speak at Sydney Biotech Meeting

Famous already for the development of the world's first vaccine against cancer, Professor Ian Frazer has been ranked by readers of Readers Digest as the second most trusted person in Australia, beaten only by fellow scientist and last year's Australian of the Year, burns specialist Dr Fiona Wood.

Both will speak at the AusBiotech Annual Conference in Sydney on Tuesday 21 November at 11:15.

Dr Wood headed up the team of doctors who treated the burns victims of the 2002 Bali bombing. Her use of 'spray on skin' sped up the recovery process for those who had suffered horrific burns.

Dr Wood first came across the "spray-on-skin" technology in 1992 when she treated a man with petrol burns to 90 per cent of his body. She turned to the emerging US-invented technology of cultured skin to save his life, working nights in a laboratory borrowed from fellow specialist Marie Stoner. The two formed a friendship and joined forces to explore tissue engineering.

Their company, Clinical Cell Culture, started operating in 1993 and is now planning to release its technology globally to use the royalties to fund further burns research. The spray-on-skin technology, ReCell has been approved for use in 26 countries including Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Japan. Professor Wood is no longer on C3's Board of Directors focusing instead on tissue engineering research for the McComb Foundation.

Professor Ian Frazer is the first to invent a vaccine that protects against cancer. Fifteen years after the discovery the product is on its way to pharmacy shelves. Gardasil prevents four strains of the human papilloma virus (HPV), two of which can cause the disease that kills 250,000 women worldwide each year.

The discovery is one of the biggest success stories of the local biotechnology industry, But the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee recently rejected a proposal to subsidise the vaccination of more than 2 million women and girls aged 11 to 26 in the first two years and about 130,000 12-year-old girls each year after that.

At a cost of $625 million for the first four years and $34 million a year subsequently, the committee said the proposal by drug company CSL Limited — which shares Australian marketing rights for the Gardasil vaccine with Merck — was too costly.

In December 1994, the University of Queensland signed a licensing agreement with Australian pharmaceutical company CSL, which signed a further agreement with US giant Merck & Co for production and global distribution of Gardasil.

Details of the deals are scarce - even CSL's exact contribution to further research remains confidential - but it is believed Merck will pay royalties of 7 per cent to CSL and 1 per cent to the university.

In February 2005, after protracted international patent disputes, Merck & Co signed a further agreement with US competitor GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) for limited intellectual property rights. GSK is now battling for market approval for its rival vaccine, Cervarix, for which CSL will receive further royalties. It wants government support for its vaccine.

Professor Frazer is now on an advisory board for Merck & Co and has also been approached by GSK.

It is believed that CSL and Merck spent close to $US1 billion bringing the vaccine to market covering costs such as: clinical trials, construction of a new plant and equipment in Philadelphia, royalties, research, patents and other legal costs. The market however is huge – effectively every girl in the developed, and developing, world.

NB Professor Frazer will also give the Millis Oration, introduced by Dr Andrew Cuthbertson, from CSL, on Tuesday 21 November at 8:30 am.