

BHI Alumni: Dr Danushka Wijesundara

Dr Danushka Wijesundara is currently working at The University of Queensland. He provided these responses in July 2020.

- 1. When were you based at the Basil Hetzel Institute?** From 1 April 2014 until 30 April 2019.
- 2. What were you doing then?** I was working as an early career research fellow in the Virology Laboratory [now called the Viral Immunology Group] which was headed by Professor Eric James Gowans. During my tenure in the Gowans Laboratory I was developing vaccines for HIV, hepatitis C virus and Zika virus.
- 3. What attracted you to work/study at the BHI?** It was another opportunity to pursue my interests in developing vaccines against viruses and viral immunology. Furthermore, shortly after I commenced my postdoc position, I received an early career fellowship from The Hospital Research Foundation (THRF) to continue my research. I also thoroughly enjoyed the mentorship and support I received from Professor Gowans and the friendly group of people that I was fortunate to work with during my time there.
- 4. What were the best things about working/studying at the BHI?** The camaraderie with the people at the Basil Hetzel Institute and being supported by the mentorship of Professor Gowans.
- 5. Do you have a favourite memory of your time at the BHI?** There were too many good memories to pick a favourite one and some of them were in social gatherings at the Woodville Hotel rather than being research based!
- 6. Would you recommend the BHI as a place to work/study? Why?** This is a difficult question to answer on a prospective basis because I would recommend it on the basis of the friendly people that were around me and the mentorship I had working for Eric during my time there.
- 7. What have you done since you left the BHI?** I am now working at The University of Queensland on developing protein-based or subunit vaccines rapidly to target emerging viral infections with the potential to cause epidemics. Consequently, and thanks to our funding body, Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), we received immediate (prior to the pandemic) support to develop a vaccine for SARS-CoV-2, the causative agent of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the infections were mainly restricted to Wuhan, China. This has allowed us to now be at the forefront of subunit vaccine development in the world and the vaccine we developed, known as SARS-CoV-2 Sclamp, is now progressing in Phase I clinical trials in humans.
- 8. What is your biggest career highlight so far?** It has to be developing the subunit vaccine for the coronavirus pandemic as described above.

- 9. What advice would you give to any current/future students at the BHI?** Take the time to participate in social activities at the BHI, create a good working environment for everyone and most importantly help each other achieve the goals for your respective projects. Also take the opportunity to talk to lab heads and senior researchers about how to shape your career going forward and definitely attend research seminars even if it is not related to your area of research.
- 10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your time at the BHI?** Nothing else, I just want to thank the BHI and THRF for helping me get where I am today.