Media Release

Dr Aleona Swegen announced as inaugural winner of $200,000 Newcastle Permanent Innovation Accelerator Program

Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI), in partnership with Newcastle Permanent, has named Dr Aleona Swegen from the University of Newcastle as the inaugural winner of the Newcastle Permanent Innovation Accelerator Program. She has been awarded $200,000 to fast-track the commercialisation of her groundbreaking fertility technology, *SpermSafe*.

Today's announcement follows the culmination of the 12-week initiative that supported four exceptional early-career researchers tackling critical health challenges in IVF, stroke, sepsis, and hearing loss.

Dr Swegen, a researcher at the University of Newcastle and a member of HMRI's Infertility and Reproduction Research Program, was selected for her work developing SpermSafe, a storage medium designed to enhance sperm survival and motility while minimising DNA damage during IVF procedures.

"Being named the inaugural winner of the Newcastle Permanent Innovation Accelerator Program gives me the time, resources, and support needed to move SpermSafe beyond the lab and into the real world," said Dr Swegen "Too often science never makes it past the research stage.

"Human IVF is rightfully a highly regulated space as we're trying to help create healthy babies. This prize will allow me to navigate the regulatory pathway and deliver a product that could help countless families realise their dream of having a baby."

The $200,000 Newcastle Permanent Innovation Accelerator Fellowship will support Dr Swegen in advancing product development and industry engagement as she moves toward clinical application.

Supporting promising ideas with real-world impact

The Newcastle Permanent Innovation Accelerator Program, launched earlier this year as part of the $2 million Newcastle Permanent and HMRI Innovation Partnership, was designed to help early-career scientists and clinicians translate their ideas into real-world healthcare solutions. All four finalists received $20,000 in seed funding, mentoring, and industry connections, culminating in Demo Day presentations to investors, health leaders, and industry stakeholders.

"Aleona's work stood out not just for its scientific rigour, but for its potential to make a truly global impact," said Professor Frances Kay, HMRI CEO and Institute Director. "Her innovation aligns perfectly with our mission to turn research into better health. We're incredibly proud to support her on this next stage of her journey. This opportunity has been made possible thanks to the generous support of Newcastle Permanent and we're deeply grateful for their investment in future of our people and region."

Newcastle Permanent spokesperson Paul Juergens said the award reflects the organisation's commitment to backing local innovation that improves community wellbeing.

"We know how important our members' health and wellbeing are to them and their families," said Mr Juergens. "By supporting Aleona and her breakthrough, we're helping to turn promising ideas into real solutions that can make a lasting difference to people across Australia and beyond. It's inspiring to see what's possible when local talent is empowered to make a difference."

Rhod McKensey, CEO of Honeysuckle Health and Aleona's coach during the program, also praised her entrepreneurial drive and commitment to impact. "Aleona combines scientific excellence, genuine passion to see her work make a real-world impact, and the determination to see the commercialisation process through to success. It's been an absolute pleasure to support her in this program."

Building a healthier future together

This initiative reflects the power of collaboration between HMRI, the University of Newcastle, Hunter New England Local Health District, and our community. Empowered by support from the University's Knowledge Exchange and Enterprise team and HNELHD's Health Innovation Living Lab, this program has laid the groundwork for transformative research and innovation that will shape the health of our region.

University of Newcastle Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research and Innovation, Professor Zee Upton commended the researchers for their vision and drive to address some of the most perplexing health challenges.

"Our researchers continually impress me with their bold ideas and commitment to finding ways to empower our communities to live better, healthier lives.

"Whether it's discovering new knowledge to support positive health behaviours and achieve health equity, or developing innovative technologies and techniques that pave the way for the future of healthcare, our researchers are making a tangible difference.

"I look forward to witnessing the impact Dr Swegen's research has on the health and wellbeing of our communities."

Professor Chris Levi, Executive Director Research and Innovation, Hunter New England Local Health District and HMRI Board Member, called the Newcastle Permanent Innovation Accelerator Program "an important new initiative supporting our local scientists to develop innovative solutions that show considerable promise for future impact on major healthcare challenges in the Hunter and beyond."

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Notes to editors – Dr Aleona Swegen Biography

Dr Aleona Swegen

Dr Aleona Swegen is an ARC DECRA Fellow at the University of Newcastle's Centre for Reproductive Science and member of HMRI's Infertility and Reproduction Research Program. A veterinarian by training, she completed her PhD in reproductive biology in 2017 and has since established herself as a leading researcher in reproductive biotechnology.

Dr Swegen's innovative work focuses on enhancing fertility outcomes, particularly through her groundbreaking SpermSafe technology. This novel sperm storage medium protects cells during IVF procedures, improving motility and reducing DNA damage to increase successful pregnancy rates.

With extensive experience at prestigious institutions including the University of Oxford and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, Dr Swegen has secured over $3 million in competitive research grants. Her work bridges laboratory research and practical applications through numerous industry collaborations including livestock breeders, veterinary clinics, thoroughbred and polo horse studs, and biotechnology companies. These partnerships have enabled Dr Swegen to ensure her inventions are targeted to clinical demand and rapidly utilised to advance breeding practices.

Beyond academia, Dr Swegen serves as a director at Burraduc Buffalo and has held leadership positions with scientific societies. Her translational research addresses critical challenges in both animal and human fertility,

with a vision to apply cutting edge reproductive solutions to transform livestock industries, human IVF practice and wildlife conservation.