



North Star project points the way to Lumina Gold Coast

Announcer

This is a podcast by Lumina, the perfect space to innovate, collaborate, and grow in health, science and tech.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Dr. Alan Parnham, welcome to HealthTech Talks.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Oh, thanks very much for having me. It's good to be here.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

You're a renal specialist who trained in the United Kingdom before coming out to Australia in the 1990s. You work across public and private hospitals here on the Gold Coast as a clinician, and you're the director of the Gold Coast Private Hospital dialysis unit. Alongside this, you're a researcher and now you're the developer of a brand new healthcare facility at the Gold Coast Health and Knowledge Precinct called North Star. So much to talk about Alan, and it's an absolute pleasure to have you here today. Can we start with a bit about you? Your medical training was in London. How did you decide that medicine was the career for you?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So I went to a technical comprehensive school in Nottingham. I was actually the first person from my school ever to go to university and for one day a week they had sort of an apprenticeship where you went off to trial a different type of job and I didn't want to go onto a farm and I didn't want to go down the pit. So it seemed to me like an easy way was to go to a local mental hospital and help. And I loved it. There was no real idea about being a doctor from where I came from. So I wanted to be a nurse, but our poor careers officer was so far out of his depth because he'd never sent anybody to university before, that he just said, "Why don't you be a doctor?" And I said, "All right."

Rebecca Griffin - Host

And that was that. So no family history of any doctors?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Builders, plumbers, miners.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

What did your family think about you going to study medicine?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest



They actually weren't very happy because they thought I would become rich and posh and not speak to them. They can't have reverse classism.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

What was it that interested you in renal medicine, which for those who may not know, is about kidneys?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So renal medicine is probably the most difficult medicine. All of the renal patients have three, four, five different medical problems. They have lots of social problems. Having kidney failure impacts upon all the other organs. So it's a hard fix with getting the diagnosis right and then fixing that in around how they are emotionally and socially as well. It's really interesting. It's different every single day and I love it.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

And did you do your training for that in London as well?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

I did six years training in London and then before coming out to Australia for the first Rugby World Cup in 1987.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

When I was researching for our interview today, I read that you're on an advisory board for a company that helps transform the lives of people with vision loss. What's the connection between your renal specialty and vision?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Okay. In 1996, I decided I didn't want to do the job I'm doing at the moment just then. I felt I needed to do some research to actually just finish me off as a doctor. And so I went to Bristol where they gave me the DNA of 150 kids with minimal change nephropathy and they gave me some immortalized podocytes. Podocytes are the cells that surround the filtering units in the kidney and keep them healthy. And we started up in a laboratory and we did different work to try and find out how they worked.

For five separate nights, I was there till after midnight trying to get rid of this little protein, this little protein band that was just driving me insane. I just kept thinking I'd done the experiment wrong and the... I did the same experiment and the same experiment. And then Professor Steve Harper came in and I asked him how I was going to get rid of this protein and he says, "It looks like a spliced variant of vascular endothelial growth factor" to which I said "Blah, blah, blah blah mate, if you can't get rid of this, I'm going back to Australia."

Anyway, so vascular endothelial growth factor is something which stimulates growth and inflammation in the body and Steve took my little band away with him and in the end set up a company called Exonate. So the protein that I'd found was a spliced variant. So what happens is the body makes vascular endothelial growth factor and then there are some proteins which splice it, which cut it. And each of those different spliced variants work in different ways and some will inhibit inflammation, so some are



pro-inflammatory, some are anti-inflammatory. It was an overnight success. After 25 years we now have an eye drop which works in exactly the same way as Avastin. So you know that people with diabetes and macular degeneration have injections into the eyes. This works the same as an eye drop and we've just done safety studies and we're about to do a main study before actually launching this.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

But something else you've done is a lot of education in Fiji and Indonesia. Can you tell us about that work?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Okay, so in 2000, the Australian and New Zealand Society of Nephrology thought that it would be good for us to share our knowledge throughout the Asia-Pacific region. So we're a really rich country and I think we are beholding to actually share what we do. And one of the drug companies, American Genetics, offered to fund for about seven of us to go to different countries and actually see what we could do on the ground. I chose North Sumatra and Aceh. At the time, North Sumatra and Aceh had about 30 million people in them and had four kidney specialists. So there was an awful lot that we could teach them. It wasn't all that easy to actually teach them, but every year since then, I've gone back for a week. But lots of really good relationships.

We've worked through the tsunami in 2004 up in Aceh. Two of the original three guys have since died, Tongal only at the age of 38. Health of their people and even their doctors often leaves a lot to be desired. It's been really rewarding. I've taken our junior doctors to actually see what happens in a third world country, which is really very educational for them. And I had an apartment in Main Beach and we'd bring those guys to come and stay in my apartment and actually learn some stuff from here as well.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

I just can't imagine how they felt about seeing the healthcare facilities that we have.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So Tongal was my best friend. So he actually took back the idea of washing hands and wearing gloves.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Oh wow.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

When I first went to Medan, which is the main town in North Sumatra, 100% of their dialysis patients were HIV positive and that's because they reused the little kidneys that we have. And so it was all chop and change. And so if HIV got into the unit, you would then use a kidney that had been used by an HIV patient and he took back, they learned from our nurses, they didn't learn that from me, but they learned that infection control and quality control from the nursing staff over here, not really from us. And I went back then two years later there was no HIV in the unit, nobody got cured of HIV, the survival of their



dialysis patients is three or six months, that's all. But that meant that we were able to get rid of all the HIV out of... which saved all their nursing staff from getting HIV.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

How incredible.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So changing the way people look at things is... And that's what travel's about. It's about seeing the different way people do things and learning from the good ones and not learning from the bad ones.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Yeah. Now along with all of the amazing things that you do, I don't know how you have time for this, but as we said in the intro, you're the developer of a new healthcare facility called The North Star. What is North Star?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So North Star is the name of our new building, but it's also an idea. I wanted to call it Parny Towers, but my son, who's a marketer thought that was a terrible idea. Obviously he gets to listen to us talking about our ideas and our plans for what we want to do with the building and he came up with the idea of North Star. He wanted it as a light to lead the way with research and it just struck a chord.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

And then what is the building? What is it all about?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

We have a group of five nephrologists, five kidney specialists, and we were looking to expand our area and we had a look at lots of different places and we sort of fell on the Health and Knowledge Precinct. So the Health and Knowledge Precinct at the moment is going gangbusters and it's fantastic. There was pretty much nothing happening then. And so we had the idea that we might build a small building, it's just gathered momentum and we're really proud of what we've actually done so far. We're really excited about having this building as a legacy and as somewhere for the doctors that we will have in there and for the research things to actually thrive.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

So it's a healthcare facility for a range of medical professionals, professional suites, research.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Yeah, so Emenda is our jewel really. So Emenda is a spinoff of the original exon. Exonate was the I protein, Emenda is a spinoff from that. What both of those companies do is they make different protein kinases, which change the splicing of vascular endothelial growth factor. And the Exonate works really well as an eye drop and gets into the back of the eyes and the current protein that we'll have for



Emenda, it's going to be involved in pain relief. So pain relief is a bare landscape. We have opiates which are morphine, pethidine, all of the heroin light drugs at one end, Panadol at the other end. We have nonsteroidal anti inflammatories, which, for kidney specialists, are really bad because they cause kidney failure, they cause stomach ulcers and there's nothing else in there. All of the stuff at this end is addictive.

And to show how much of a wasteland it is, we are starting to use things like cannabis oil. So cannabis isn't even a painkiller, it's something which slightly changes the way that we see pain, but it's not a painkiller. So it turns out that as an injection or even, sorry injection into joints or infection to give imparenterally can prevent pain in the knees of arthritic mice. There's a long way to go. Emenda is now a purely... So we've poached, tempted them to come from the United Kingdom to become a totally Australian company. So that's taken a little bit of bribery, but a lot of persuasion. And I sort of owned a bit of the company before all of this. It will be jobs for Australians. It will fit really brilliantly into the whole of the Lumina X project, which I love.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

And there'll be spaces for other companies to come in?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Space for other companies.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Yes.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Space for other specialists, but we're not just there to make money. I'm really keen to value add, to actually do research, to improve knowledge, to teach the medical students, to teach the guys from Griffith, to teach the junior doctors.

Announcer

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Rebecca Griffin - Host

And what about the physical building?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

It's 10 stories. We are having the top floor. So we have a vascular surgeon, we have an orthopedic surgeon, we have endocrinologists, and we have Emenda and we have some old alumni from the cohort accelerator program, which I'm also pretty excited about as well.



Rebecca Griffin - Host

So tell me, in the information about The North Star, it says that it was developed for health professionals by health professionals. Why is that important, Alan?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So I think the building is important in a couple of ways. I think the whole of the area makes me excited and I think we will gain lots from being close to all of the other buildings. We are actually health professionals and so we know what health quality is. I'm pretty happy to make money, but I'm actually pretty happy not to make very much money either. I'm a doctor, I've got money already. I'm just really keen to actually set up a legacy where we can have quality medicine, quality research and actually do more for the community. But that will be in partnership with the government and be in partnership with the other buildings as well because the other buildings will bring clever people. And so if we go back to when I was first here in '88, the Gold Coast was a joke for medicine.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Mm-hmm.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

It was a great place to come on holiday. We have great beaches and a great rainforest, but if you wanted to get treated, you went to Brisbane. So it's changed and we now have huge opportunities to actually change that forever and make us a center of excellence so that's really what I want to be at. That's why it's not just my building and I don't look upon the other buildings as competition. I want them to be there. I want this to get a critical mass. And once we get a critical mass, it's still the same brilliant place to live. And we'll get companies from Southeast Asia, from the United States, from Great Britain that'll want to base themselves here because they can push their company further by being in this area and by interacting with all the other stuff going on in the other buildings as well.

So the other buildings are competition a little, but it's like where you go and get your car fixed, you go to somewhere where there's 10 different car places. If you want to do your research, you will come here because we have two universities on the Gold Coast. We have six hospitals including the beautiful Gold Coast University Hospital, all really close. And so for health, the Lumina X is just going to be brilliant.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Just want to talk a little bit more about your North Star. How will it be different? I mean I can see your passion, but how will it be different to other healthcare facilities?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So it is private, it is run by doctors who are funding it themselves. So they're funding their own research. They are deciding on what research projects they want to do and where they get money for it and what's important to them to move further ahead. And I think it's really important for the government to spend our tax in a wise way, but sometimes they can just be too wise and too careful. The government aren't there to take risks and so tends to go fairly slowly when the government invests and the



government says we'll do this research. It has to be people willing to give up their lives and work till midnight like I did in Bristol and give up their house so they can spend all of their money on a silly new idea that may make a fortune, but may make them bankrupt as well. Having those people in this area, which will be what will drive it to greatness, I think.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Alan, where are we at in terms of construction and a potential opening date?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So we are almost at the finishing line of getting the really boring stuff done and I suspect that we'll start building probably in the next three or four months.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Maybe beginning of 2025 we might have some tenants moving in?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Yeah, about that. That'll be so exciting.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

So there's still room for tenants if people are interested in finding out more?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So certainly and if tenants that want to do research and some of the other bigger buildings are probably going to charge more rent than we are. So if they have really good ideas and can contribute towards our family, towards what we want for the building, we are very much, very happy to look at them favorably.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

It sounds like it's going to be an amazing place to work and a place that will really change lives and healthcare.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

I hope so.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Where can people find out more information about North Star if they're interested in becoming a tenant?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

We have a website and that's thenorthstar.net.au.



Rebecca Griffin - Host

You're Lumina X mentor. Now Lumina X is a health tech startup accelerator program here at the Precinct. What's your mentor role?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So I'm the physician. So the guys get ideas, they bring the ideas into the accelerator program and I'm, it feels really odd to say this, but I'm the common sense person. So I look at their ideas and we sort of work out whether those ideas will run in the health system as it is. These guys are very happy to pivot and go off in a different direction. I think what kills an awful lot of the startups is that they spend too long and too much money going in the wrong direction and we move them, and you don't usually move them by very much, but we move them by 10, 15 degrees in a slightly different direction and make them more efficient.

The other thing that I can do and have done is if these guys go to want to talk to a doctor which does their stuff or want to go and talk to Ramsey Health Care, I'm in the public system and the private system, I know pretty much every specialist on the coast. So I can get past those dragon ladies on the reception of both the doctors and of the guys who actually run the big private hospitals and the public hospitals. So I can sort of filter which ones should go and see them and which ones will be a complete waste of their time.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

So now you didn't get to name the building, the Parny building, but you have-

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Parny Towers.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

The Parny Towers, but you have got the Parny Prize.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Yeah.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

What's the Parny Prize?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

So I didn't name that either. That was Ben. The accelerator program has increased in quality and quantity of people coming here every year. So it's been going now for three years. The Parny Prize is an investment of \$100,000, which I promised at the start of this year. I'd actually invested even more in that both the previous two years, but this time I promised sight unseen than I would invest \$100,000 in one of the companies at the end. So that sounds really philanthropic and nice and whatever, it's just not. So it's a brilliant investment. So it's sight unseen, it's a brilliant investment. I actually get to know the



people and you work out that these guys will go on and do anything for their project. I know which projects are likely to fail and which ones aren't. And so for me it's probably a pretty good investment. I haven't made any money yet.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Early days.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Yeah, but it's probably a pretty good investment. And as we said before, you get to mix with really clever, brave people who put it all on the line and then by the time they're actually, they've usually used up most of their capital and so by the time they get to the accelerator program, they then come up with great ideas to move on, but do need some money to actually do that.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Now before I let you go onto your hugely busy day, which started at 4:30, I honestly don't know how you could fit anything else into your life. But being so incredibly busy with lots of different roles and projects, how do you relax and unwind?

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Oh yeah. I don't really relax much. So my holidays are walking Kokoda, climbing mountains in the Himalayas or South America. We are probably going to walk the Inca Trail again next year. I've walked the Inca Trail before. So my holidays are usually sort of adventure holidays or rugby. We'll go to the Rugby World Cup this year. I've been to every Rugby World Cup since 2003 and went to the first one in 1987. And I've also just got two new grandkids, so that's pretty important too.

Rebecca Griffin - Host

Absolutely. Well, it's been a pleasure chatting with you this morning and all the best of luck with North Star.

Dr Alan Parnham - Guest

Thank you very much. That's really kind.

Announcer

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