

Millionaire gives up a fortune to save lives

David Gunn can thank a storm in London for helping him become an enormously successful businessman. In retirement, he has donated more than \$2 million to medical research. **BRAD CROUCH** reports.

A RETIRED, little-known Adelaide businessman who once used a Parafield Gardens payphone as his office is one of South Australia's greatest medical research philanthropists.

David Gunn, 80, has overseen more than \$2.1 million in donations through the Muriel Gunn Medical Research Trust Fund, set up in honour of his beloved wife who died of brain cancer in 1980.

Donations include about \$500,000 for a neurosurgical microscope for Flinders Medical Centre, more than \$1 million as the biggest individual donor to the SA Health and Medical Research Institute, and grants to the NeuroSurgical Research Foundation, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Research Fund, the Australian Brain Foundation, the Bone Marrow Registry and the Hanson Centre for Brain Research.

His wife, Muriel, a teacher he met at a church table tennis club, planted the seed of giving back as their fortunes rose.

Former Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam also inspired Mr Gunn to be a philanthropist.

"I found out the Whitlam Government was giving railway unions tax money to fund a resident poet," he told the *Sunday Mail*. "I thought 'what? They're giving my taxes to fund some peanut to write poetry for the unions?' I would rather give my money away somewhere I want to see it go to rather than have some politician decide for me."

And give it away he has, with his latest donation being \$54,000 to the NeuroSurgical Research Foundation to buy equipment for clinical and research use for neurological conditions at the University of

Adelaide Medical School.

Mr Gunn's remarkable contribution to medical research matches a remarkable life.

He was born in Semaphore, but his marine engineer father – a reservist – was called up to the navy in World War II and the family shifted around accordingly, starting with Melbourne.

He recalls his dismay at joining a new school at Ivanhoe and being handed a slate board and chalk: "I had graduated to inkwells by then," he said.

Plans to follow his father's footsteps fell foul due to seasickness, revealed during national service with the navy.

David Gunn

Mr Gunn worked as a trainee in the Bomb Ballistics Group at the Long Range Weapons Establishment, calibrating Canberra bombers' release mechanisms at Woomera, in the Far North.

"We would send our data to the computers – in those days the computers were a bunch of women working at the Long Range Weapons Establishment HQ," he recalls.

He worked in several engineering jobs, including at Adelaide University's chemical engineering department, gaining valuable experience along the way.

After marrying, he decided to complete his degree full-time but Muriel fell sick with pneumonia.

When she recovered, the couple headed to Britain to find work and adventure.

They set up in Earl's Court, London, but at each job interview, the interviewer "would look down their nose at me and say 'oh, another one from the Antipodes'."

A Scotsman who was recruiting teachers offered Muriel a job – and when she asked about her husband, the canny Scot realised Mr Gunn's engineering background could be put to use.

"That's how I ended up masquerading as a maths teacher in Scotland," he said.

By January 1965, the couple were back in London and, while out walking on a bleak day – and with money running short – a sleet shower saw them duck into a building for warmth.

"Welcome, folks, we're so glad you want to emigrate to Canada," came the booming welcome as the door of Canada House shut behind them.

They were convinced to head to Canada and booked a trip on the *Queen Elizabeth* liner for New York, arriving with just \$180 and an introduction to a firm in Montreal.

However, the firm had no work but gave him several leads. "After a week or so, I had a choice of jobs with Du Pont, Monsanto or Pulp and Paper," he recalls.

Mr Gunn describes the time in Canada – from 1965-72 – as halcyon days, living at Brockville on the St Lawrence River where the couple had a yacht and a prosperous life.

Mr Gunn used to shovel about a metre of snow at a time in winter but, one year, the falls were so deep he was shovelling from his room.



"It was time to go home," he said. "Our Canadian friends couldn't believe it; they said it was the best place in the world, but Muriel and I knew of one better."

While in Canada, he had been convinced to try polyurethane foam as a new form of insulation on an engineering project and quickly realised its potential.

The couple sold up and used part of the proceeds to buy equipment to bring to Australia.

"We landed at the right time with the right equipment," Mr Gunn recalls.

The Gunns set up their business in 1972 and, with the kitty drying up, were living frugally, with Mr Gunn using a public phone box in Parafield Gardens to set up business meetings.

His first job was to spray polyurethane into a refrigerated pantechicon truck to replace traditional insulation.

While this was a success, no one was rushing to embrace the new technology so between May and July 1972 he briefly branched out as a painting contractor.

Mr Gunn knew little about painting – and there may be a house in Croydon with purple gloss enamel on the hallway.

David Gunn



ADVENTURE: David Gunn on a camel in Egypt during his journey to England in 1964 with wife Muriel, left.



AS OUR BUSINESS PROSPERED, MURIEL SUGGESTED PHILANTHROPIC CAUSES

DRIVEN TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE: David Gunn at home on Hindmarsh Island. He is calling on more wealthy individuals - and big business - to dig deep in 2015 to foster a culture of giving to worthy causes.

walls, but the householder was happy.

A job for Yalumba Wines insulating a warehouse opened doors in the winery industry; an offer to insulate a Lenswood apple cold store to an airtight state for free unless the system worked (it did) paved the way for more opportunities.

Work in piggeries and poultry farms followed as word spread about the new Gun-spray system that was cheaper and much faster to install than traditional insulation.

A Government aid program in Kashmir was not profitable but Mr Gunn said it was an amazing experience in his life's journey.

He later branched into a patented panel building system and business success followed, but he never forgot doing the hard yards, when a friendly doorway offered shelter from a sleet storm, or a working payphone was a life-line to building a business.

Of course, money can't buy everything. His beloved wife, Muriel, was diagnosed with brain cancer and passed away on December 30, 1980.

The couple did not have children. "We had been married 22 years and she was my great love," he said.

"As our business prospered, she suggested philanthropic causes – she initiated this."

His wife's death was a catalyst for Mr Gunn to devote the couple's wealth to medical research, in particular neurosurgical research, and equipment for clinical use. He wants more wealthy individuals – and big business – to dig deep in 2015 to foster a culture of giving to worthy causes.

"Everybody should have a think about it," he says.

"I often look at the big banks, corporations like BHP, and often think that if they levied just half a cent per share dividend, it would amount to millions for good works.

"Some corporations are philanthropic and others might be but they hide it under a bushel."

Mr Gunn noted the wonderful contribution of those who don't have money but provide their time as volunteers for organisations such as Meals on Wheels.

"People who work hard to raise money for worthy causes are more philanthropic than me. All I have to do is ask my accountant how much money we have to give away – it's easy.

"People often have different visions – for example, many support the arts – but science research is my interest."

THE LATEST PURCHASE

David Gunn's latest donation through the Muriel Gunn Medical Research Trust Fund and the NeuroSurgical Research Foundation is \$54,500 for a Bio-Plex MAGPIX Multiplex Reader and Automated Bio-Plex Pro Wash Station.

The MAGPIX system enables researchers to detect and measure multiple proteins, peptides or nucleic acids (analytes) in a single volume of sample.

It revolutionises the way in which scientists are able to detect and quantitate these analytes and will produce results more efficiently.

The system will provide a vital tool in all facets of neurosurgical research, including into brain tumours, traumatic brain injury, stroke, spinal cord injury, Alzheimer's disease and motor neuron disease.

Mr Gunn is SAHMRI's largest single donor and has a laboratory named after him, the David R Gunn Genomics Suite.

This suite houses the latest DNA sequencers of which the largest is capable of generating a terabase of DNA sequence data in a single run, according to SAHMRI. (A terabase is an amount of genetic sequence data equivalent to 10 to the power of 12 base pairs).