

Next, a leap of faith

A meeting of the world's sharpest medical minds will give Melbourne a platform to hone its ability to commercialise research, writes Jeff Whalley

PROFESSOR Sharon Lewin's peers say she could cure AIDS.

If she does, the money to help deliver the cure around the world — as a product in the marketplace — won't come from Australia.

And that frustrates her.

Over the next month she hopes to help change this.

While Australia, and Melbourne in particular, is good at making groundbreaking discoveries, we struggle with the next step in the process — attracting investment locally to bring products to market.

Prof Lewin says the upcoming AIDS 2014 conference provides an opportunity for Melbourne to grow as a place that can successfully commercialise leading research.

She is co-chair of the event, which will be held at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre later this month. It will be the biggest medical conference ever held in Australia.

Thousands of delegates from around the world — including Bill Clinton and Bob Geldof — will attend and it is projected to inject about \$80 million into the local



Professor Sharon Lewin's discovery of HIV latency has won her wide renown.

economy. It is not being held in Melbourne by chance.

Australia is renowned, Prof Lewin says, for research funded by government including studies into clinical care, drugs and other new treatments.

The Melbourne Convention Bureau fought a 17-year battle to get the conference to the city.

Bureau chief Karen Bolinger says previous

conferences in Melbourne, including the physics conference two years ago where it emerged that scientists had found the so-called "God particle", have brought in skills, trade, investment and jobs.

"If you think about the future economy of Australia, the knowledge sector, we have a lot of real strengths that can replace quarries of the past," she says. Prof Lewin agrees.

"We do the discovery and ideas and the research methodology very well," she says.

"But there are a whole lot of steps to move a great idea into a commercial outcome — meaning a diagnostic test that is used around the world, or a new drug for example — and we don't do that bit very well."

Prof Lewin says the problem stems in part from an investment culture that is risk

averse when it comes to local innovation.

"We don't have a huge track record of successful commercialisation, so therefore (it's about) knowing the steps, recognising when the signs are there to move it down a commercial path," she says.

Prof Lewin is director of the Department of Infectious Diseases at The Alfred hospital and Monash



University and co-head of the Centre for Biomedical Research at the Burnet Institute. Her fame in the scientific world comes from her discovery of HIV latency — that is, how HIV enters resting cells and goes to "sleep". She has since been lauded by colleagues as a leading figure in the quest for an AIDS cure.

Prof Lewin studied for her medical degree and PhD at Monash University, and completed her postdoctoral fellowship at Rockefeller University, New York, with Professor David Ho, a year after *Time* magazine named the renowned scientist as person of the year.

She says the conference will bring a critical mass of the world's best thinkers to Melbourne.

"I think it can bring exposure to world experts for young scientists, opportunities for collaboration ... and greater opportunities for funding.

"And also your success in science is based on people knowing what you do.

"It is quite a challenge for Australians to get traction so people know what they are doing. It is a lot harder as an Australian than an American."

Ms Lewin also says there are growing possibilities around the use of public-private partnerships in funding research. "It diversifies the funding sources and brings the principles of private industry to science which can be helpful."