

“They laughed when I said I was going to study Barossans”

When Prof. Ian Hamilton-Craig announced to his Queensland colleagues that he was going to centre his study leave research project in the Barossa Valley, they laughed.

“Most medical academics try to go to internationally important universities or the great medical research centres for study leave,” he explained.

“I got a lot of ribbing about drinking good wine, rather than doing serious medical research.”

Ian, who is the Professor of Preventive Cardiology and Internal Medicine at Griffith University, Gold Coast, visited the Barossa last week, to introduce the Barossa Family Heart Study to the medical and general community.

While the Adelaide-born cardiologist admitted he enjoyed a drop of our local wine, which he believes can have some cardiac benefits, he also said the study he is launching is a project he has wanted to

do for many years.

“When I was in cardiology practice in North Adelaide, I had many patients from the Barossa area, who were of German Lutheran background.” A significant number from the Silesian area had a special gene mutation called FH Morocco.

“This mutation causes very high cholesterol levels and can lead to premature heart attack.”

These people have what is medically known as FH (familial hypercholesterolemia).

“I find it easier to call it genetic high cholesterol. It can exist in thin people who have a good, low fat diet.

Only medical treatment can bring cholesterol down to a safe level, and so reduce the risk of early heart attack.

“In this study we are looking for people with this gene, and through their family doctors, helping them to have the appropriate treatment.

“We also hope to test other family

members for the gene, to make sure everyone who needs it can have treatment. Today this can be done safely and simply with a single blood test.

“Modern treatment really works.

“For example, a patient with FH who had been treated for several years came into my office and handed me a photograph, saying: ‘This is my first grandchild.’ Ian replied with the usual ‘lovely baby’ comments.

“My patient looked at me and said: ‘Doctor, you just don’t get it. I am the first male person in my family to live long enough to see his own grandchild!’”

That moment was one of the highlights of Ian’s clinical career.

“It was a confirmation that correct FH treatment works, and we can now help many people with this gene to have a normal lifespan. I have that baby photograph over my desk to remind me of the importance of this kind of research.”

The study is also looking at what is called

the Founder Effect. “This is an increase in FH gene frequency caused by people living in the same geographical area for generations, and marrying within the area, as has been the case for the Barossa Lutheran community.

“So the Barossa is rather a unique population, in whom FH and premature heart attack may occur more frequently than elsewhere.

“It’s therefore very important to recognise people with FH Morocco, and treat their high cholesterol as early in life as possible.”

Prof Hamilton-Craig has been giving talks to groups of local area doctors and to Rotary Club members.

“We want to make sure people are aware of the project and understand its aims – to reduce heart disease in the Barossa area.

“We hope the community will embrace the project and recognise its value. We are developing a Barossa Family Heart Study website so everyone can access the information and take action if necessary.”

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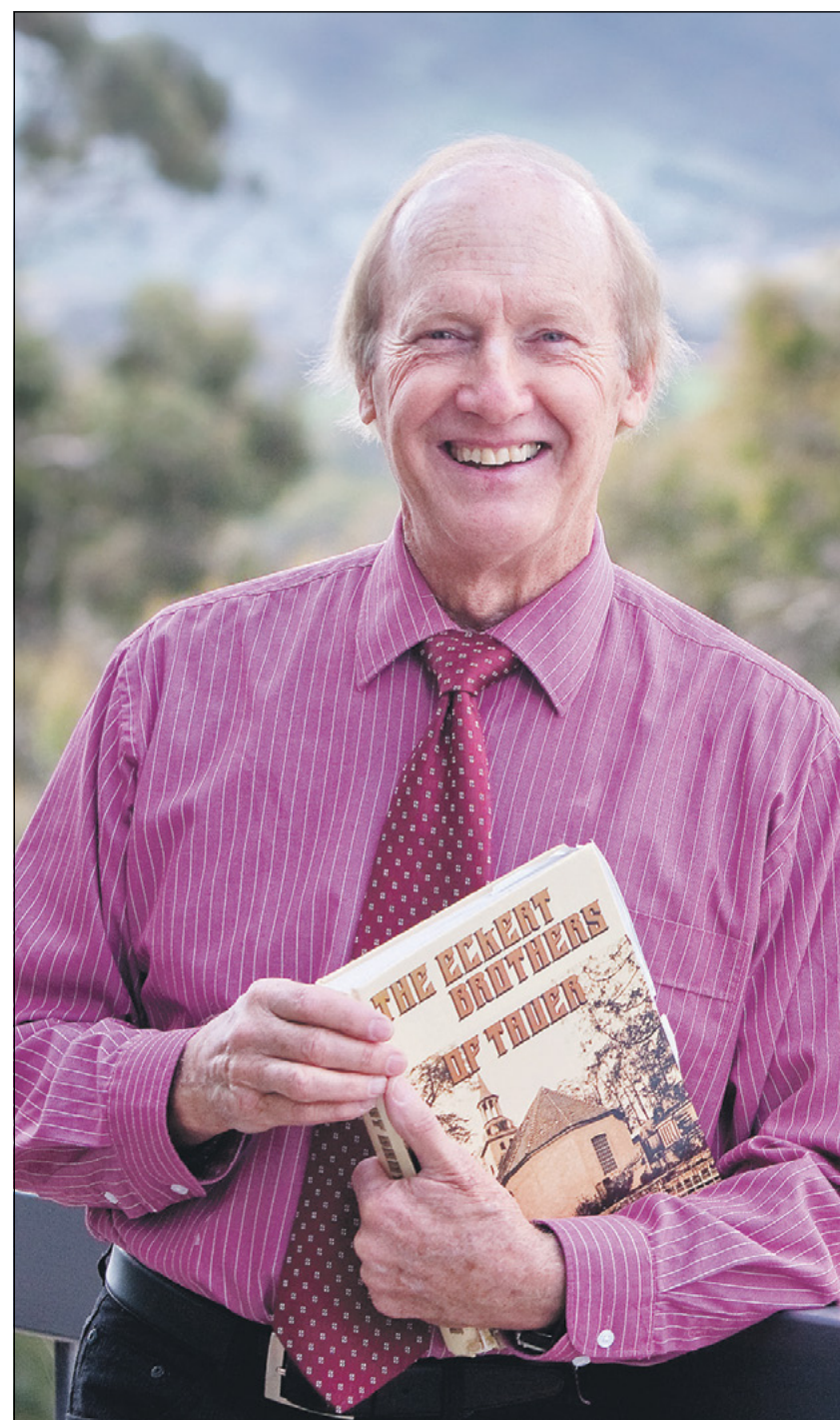
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