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Health gamechanger: why DNA screening must be available for all

EXCLUSIVE
NATASHA ROBINSON
HEALTH EDITOR

Australia is on the brink of a healthcare revolution driven by DNA science that will save lives and prevent disease – but top researchers, clinicians, and patient and advocacy groups are pushing for greater urgency in translating breakthrough genomic medicine

to the clinic and providing equal access to screening.
An open letter signed by more than 100 leading scientists and clinicians and almost 50 peak health and patient groups has described a crossroads for Australia, as genomics advances at a rapid pace with the promise of widely available personalised therapies if there is equitable access to gene testing together with clinical expertise.
"We are living through a once-in-a-century transformation of



A new section online
healthcare, driven by rapid advances in genomic medicine," the open letter reads.
"These advances are already

changing outcomes for thousands of Australians each year, and over the next decade they will alter almost every field of healthcare.
"However, unless we move urgently, we risk falling behind.
"This is not simply an academic matter: this is an opportunity for public leadership, to ensure the advances of genomics do not leave behind our most disadvantaged citizens or exacerbate existing health inequities.
"We believe all Australians, in-

cluding those outside major cities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and multicultural communities, should be able to benefit from the fundamental advances of genomic medicine.
"We must now seize the oncoming transformative advances in healthcare to ensure we are at the forefront of this new field – for the benefit of all Australians."
Genomic medicine uses genetic screening to identify DNA mutations, and then analyses

those variations against massive international datasets to identify disease-causing gene changes.
Rapid advances in therapeutics mean it is now possible in some cases to provide personalised medicines that can treat symptoms or even correct disease-causing genetic problems in patients.
The federal government has now moved to cement genomic medicine as a national health priority by committing to the funding and establishment of a new body,

to drive the translation of breakthroughs in DNA science into the everyday care for patients.
The announcement of the new body Genomics Australia was welcomed by scientists and doctors but there are questions over its status and whether it will be a legislated corporate Commonwealth entity in the same model as Cancer Australia. The first task of Genomics Australia will be to improve access to personalised cancer care.
"Australia stands on the precipice of a revolution in genomic research," federal Health Minister Mark Butler said. "We need to make sure Australia can take full advantage of our incredible research, taking it beyond the lab and benefiting patients."
"Genomics Australia will provide that leadership and help drive

Continued on Page 4
MORE REPORTS P4
INQUIRY P19

BENCH BLAME GAME FOR RAPE ACQUITTALS

Chief judge puts culture wars on trial

ELLIE DUDLEY
LEGAL AFFAIRS
CORRESPONDENT

The chief justice of the ACT Supreme Court has claimed that culture wars could be causing the acquittal of accused rapists, declaring she does not understand why jurors "find it so hard to believe" allegations of sexual assault and has a "feeling of unease" when it comes to how juries approach cases.

Chief Justice Lucy McCallum made what she described as "controversial" statements while calling on researchers to investigate juror decision-making in rape cases, sharpening her past critique of the way sexual assault complainants were treated in the territory.

Although she preceded the comments by saying juries always get the verdict right, the Chief Justice immediately bemoaned the way jurors approached sexual-assault cases, and questioned whether the impact of "traumatic" evidence contributed to verdicts.

She also revealed how she recently allowed jurors to access counselling services in the middle of a trial to discuss the "feelings that the evidence was evoking".

The Chief Justice's concerns, given in an address to the Jury Research and Practice Conference in Canberra on Friday, mark a rare

INSIDE

Did Lucy McCallum tell jurors in the ACT to believe all women? Perhaps not in so many words. Still, it's a dark day for any defendant facing trial for sexual assault in the ACT.

JANET ALBRECHTSEN P5



intervention from the head of a jurisdiction over one of the key tenets of the justice system.

Her comments come amid growing tensions over how the courts handle rape allegations, with the Australian Law Reform Commission set to release a final report into justice responses to sexual violence in January.
A review into rape laws commissioned by the Albanese government and released last month praised a national shift towards affirmative-consent models that required less scrutiny of complainants in courts, and led to greater prosecutions of nuanced sexual violence cases.

But in NSW, some rape prosecutions have come under significant criticism from District Court judges for having too little evidence to secure a conviction.

This week, The Australian

revealed senior silks were firmly opposing a "drastic" Victorian bill that would lead to the cross-examination of rape complainants being axed from the committal stage of a hearing.

During Friday's conference, the Chief Justice said that since she had returned to Canberra from the NSW Supreme Court she had had "a feeling of unease about what juries make of allegations, particularly allegations of sexual assault".

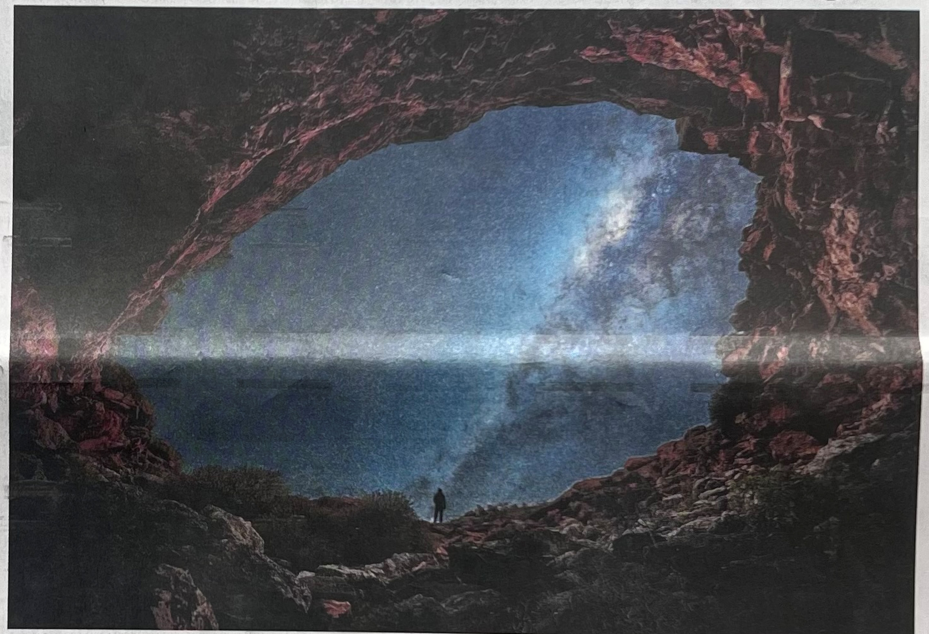
"For me, I want to understand why in the 2020s jurors find it so hard to believe allegations of sexual assault," she said. "Now, I know that's a controversial statement... but it's a sense that it's just too much. I don't know what the dynamics are there."

Chief Justice McCallum, who presided over the aborted rape trial of political staffer Bruce Lehmann, said that throughout her lengthy career on the bench she had only once experienced a trial where she thought the result was not right. Instead of an acquittal, she said she thought the accused should have been convicted. "So at least that was comforting... at least if you abide by the principle (that it is) better for nine guilty men to walk free than one innocent man to be found guilty," she said.

Despite these comments, the Chief Justice attempted to explore some reasons why jurors

Continued on Page 5

'Like dropping a brick on a meringue'



STEFAN EBERHARD

One of the giant caves on the Nullarbor Plain that are threatened by the proposed green hydrogen energy hub

EXCLUSIVE

CHRISTINE MIDDAP
CHIEF WRITER

To many, the Nullarbor Plain is a flat, featureless landscape – desolate, sunbaked and windblown.

The ideal spot, you might think, to build enormous wind and solar farms far from outraged neighbours and removed from rich agricultural lands and protected mountain ranges.

So when a proposal was announced to build one of the

world's largest green-hydrogen energy hubs involving 3000 wind turbines and 60 million solar panels across 229 million hectares of crown land and pastoral leases in Western Australia's far southeast, the response was muted.

That's because most Australians who tackle the two-day drive across the Nullarbor Plain between Adelaide and Perth have no idea of the paradise beneath their car tyres. Stefan Eberhard, a cave scientist who has spent 42 years exploring the subterranean network of caves and lakes harbouring fossils, otherworldly

INSIDE

This is now my working theory: Our political class is breathtakingly, stunningly energy illiterate. Ruled by virtue signalling and not facts.

CHRIS UHLMANN P17

creatures and Indigenous rock art. Laced under the harsh but culturally rich lands of the Miring people is a time machine reaching back millions of years to the Pliocene epoch, providing scientists with a unique record not just



world's largest acid limestone karst system, which includes a spectacular hidden world of ancient caves and rock holes of staggering dimensions, beauty, scientific values and priceless cultural importance," Eberhard says.

"Go ahead and build this energy hub, just don't do it here in this incredibly important and fragile place. From an environmental perspective it's the wrong location right on top of the heart of the Nullarbor limestone system."

Eberhard and wife Bronwen
Continued on Page 7

One place PM is popular – Beijing

WILL GLASGOW
GEOFF CHAMBERS

Beijing has nominated Anthony Albanese as the leader other US allies should emulate ahead of a meeting between the Australian Prime Minister and China's President Xi Jinping in South America.

In an editorial published on the eve of meetings of APEC and G20 leaders in Peru and Brazil, the China Daily praised the Aus-

tralian PM's "strategic autonomy" amid "unprecedented geopolitical complexity and uncertainty" after the election of Donald Trump.

Beijing's most authoritative English-language masthead offered Mr Albanese as an exemplar for other American allies as they engage in the difficult "balancing act" between their security partner in Washington and their economic relationship with China.

Speaking on the first day of the

APEC leaders summit in Lima on Saturday (AEDT), Mr Albanese will champion free and fair trade as the vehicle to lift people out of poverty and raise living standards.

As the Chinese President seeks to rally international support amid fears of a US-China trade war, Mr Albanese will rail against isolationism and promote the benefits of "our interconnected global economy".

FULL REPORT P6

Senior NT cop 'dressed as KKK'

EXCLUSIVE

STEPHEN RICE
LIAM MENDES

A former Northern Territory police officer claims an executive member of the force dressed as a member of the Ku Klux Klan and drove around Alice Springs

to scare Indigenous residents. The same senior officer, who has since left the force, "made fun of a coloured police officer" by calling him Rodney King – a reference to the African-American man brutally beaten by Los Angeles police – according to a statutory declaration from former Territory Response Group officer Carey Joy.

The revelation comes after the NT Independent Commission Against Corruption controversially closed its investigation into five TRG officers who engaged in shocking racist mock awards because there was "no admissible evidence".

ICAC delegate Patricia Kelly SC ruled that no further action
Continued on Page 8

Logging poll strife looms

EXCLUSIVE: Anthony Albanese faces a potentially damaging election stoush with timber workers over the "priority" development of a new carbon-credit method that would pay states to "stop or slow down" harvesting of native forests.

FULL REPORT P2

EDITORIALS P14
LETTERS P14
COMMENTARY P15

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'Like dropping a brick on a meringue'



STEFAN EBERHARD

One of the giant caves on the Nullarbor Plain that are threatened by the proposed green hydrogen energy hub

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world's largest green-hydrogen energy hubs involving 3000 wind turbines and 60 million solar panels across 2.29 million hectares of crown land and pastoral leases in Western Australia's far southeast, the response was muted.

That's because most Australians who tackle the two-day drive across the Nullarbor Plain between Adelaide and Perth have no idea of the paradise beneath their car tyres, insists Stefan Eberhard, a cave scientist who has spent 42 years exploring the subterranean network of caves and lakes harbouring fossils, otherworldly

INSIDE

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CHRIS UHLMANN P17

creatures and Indigenous rock art.

Laced under the harsh but culturally rich lands of the Mirning people is a time machine reaching back millions of years to the Pliocene epoch, providing scientists with a unique record not just



of past environmental events, but clues to our future climate too.

The effect of the proposed development would be akin to dropping a brick on a meringue, Eberhard says.

"The Nullarbor Plain is the

world's largest arid limestone karst system, which includes a spectacular hidden world of ancient caves and rock holes of staggering dimensions, beauty, scientific values and priceless cultural importance," Eberhard says.

"Go ahead and build this energy hub, just don't do it here in this incredibly important and fragile place. From an environmental perspective it's the wrong location right on top of the heart of the Nullarbor limestone system."

Eberhard and wife Bronwen

Continued on Page 7



STEFAN AND BRONWYN EBERHARD, PETER ROGERS

Save the Nullarbor co-founders Stefan and Bronwyn Eberhard and a series of pictures they took on a nine-week trip to catalogue the region's natural beauty



Project 'like dropping a brick on a meringue'

Continued from Page 1

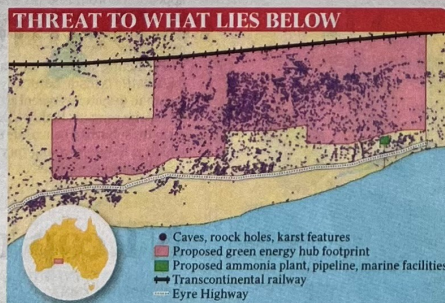
have teamed with scientists to protect the Nullarbor, echoing growing disquiet about the siting of renewables projects in sensitive areas and critical habitat in the eastern and southern states.

These looming battles highlight the problems for state and federal governments racing to decarbonise the economy and meet green-energy targets while facing pushback from residents, community groups and scientists over the location of thousands of wind turbines and millions of solar panels and the associated batteries, roads and transmission infrastructure.

At full capacity, the mammoth Western Green Energy Hub on the Nullarbor, north of Eucla, would produce 3.5 million tonnes of green hydrogen a year targeting domestic and international markets; last year it entered a partnership with South Korea's biggest electricity utility.

Once complete the developers say the hub will generate more than 200 TWh of renewable energy, "similar in magnitude" to Australia's current total generation.

"It provides a major opportunity for domestic and international green fuel supply and ultimately domestic power distribution, offsetting approximately



22 million tonnes of CO2 emissions per year," they say.

The project will include a suite of hydrogen electrolyzers, water and hydrogen pipelines, a marine offloading facility and desalination plant along with accommodation for 8000 workers. It's estimated 27,188ha of land will be cleared.

The West Australian government said the project would put the state at the forefront of green hydrogen production as demand is expected to soar for use in power generation, shipping fuel, mineral processing and manufacturing.

It's part of a push to make Australia a global hydrogen leader even as uncertainty remains over

the economics of this "fuel of the future", and three major developers - Origin, Woodside and Fortescue - recently shelved local production plans.

As work progresses on the scoping of the Nullarbor facility, opponents say they can't stay silent.

"The proposed development is labelled a 'green energy' project because it aims to use solar and wind energy to create hydrogen and ammonia; but the project is not 'green,'" Eberhard says.

"It will involve removing vegetation across hundreds of square kilometres of fragile limestone ecosystem, and thousands of kilometres of roads, powerlines, and underground pipelines.

"The pipelines alone will damage and erode the soils and harm the underground ecosystem, which is the home of rare and unique cave species."

The shallow soils and thin crust that protect the giant limestone karst formations honeycombed under the surface by years of seeping rain are particularly vulnerable to erosion.

The development will take place on the land of the Mirning people who hold native title rights across most of the proposed project area and have formed a partnership with developers InterContinental Energy and CWP Global to become 10 per cent shareholders with a permanent seat on the board and the opportunity to become a majority shareholder in 50 years.

The Mirning Traditional Land Aboriginal Corporation did not respond to questions but said earlier this year in a social media post that consultation and negotiations for a land-use agreement were under way but it was early days.

It said the project could go ahead only with its agreement.

"The caves are a priority for the Mirning people and efforts are being made to avoid them in the proposed project footprint," the corporation said.

The Western Green Energy Hub has also moved to reassure

opponents, saying "avoidance of impact" was paramount to respect the environment and safeguard its installations.

WGEH says it has carried out location studies to help ensure there will be no physical overlay nor impact on the cave and karst features. Fauna, flora and cultural heritage surveys are ongoing.

"While the project has a large perimeter of land, around 95 per cent of the total project area will remain untouched," a spokesperson said, adding that there was considerable flexibility over where to place the solar panels, wind turbines and related infrastructure.

"WGEH has particularly taken into account those areas that are highly sensitive and protected, and where no WGEH project development will take place."

However, Eberhard contends that the sheer number of sensitive sites and the interconnected nature of the landscape and groundwater system make it impossible to avoid or mitigate harm.

Beneath the surface, an immense aquifer carries water to the Great Australian Bight and the submerged caverns with crystal clear water and extraordinary life forms are vulnerable to contamination, he says.

On the South Australian side, a good part of the Nullarbor is protected in national parks, and Eber-

hard and his fellow scientists are pushing for the entire site to be recognised as a World Heritage area, pointing to a 1992 report commissioned by the federal government that found the Nullarbor karsts meet World Heritage criteria.

A letter of concern, signed by 20 scientists, was sent to Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek earlier this year in the hope the federal government would intervene to deal with the Nullarbor the same way it saved the Franklin River and the Queensland wet tropics.

Cave scientist David Gillieson, former vice-president of the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association, says the caving and scientific community was appalled that the development might go ahead.

"The caves have preserved ancient underground landscapes, environmental histories and fauna that have remained 'frozen in time' for hundreds of thousands and even millions of years," Professor Gillieson says.

Irrespective of its value for humans, Eberhard says, the Nullarbor should exist undisturbed as a place to experience raw nature, immense space and uninterrupted 360-degree horizon views.

"We have to understand what could be lost," he says.

