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ATA Scientific – Travel Award Winner, Jan 2012

Ms Celeste Donato (PhD Scholar, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Enteric Virus Group)

Dear Minister

Our laboratory deserves a million dollar research grant because.....



we work on rotavirus. Rotavirus was discovered by researchers in our group in 1973 and is recognised as the principal aetiological agent of severe gastroenteritis in young children. Rotavirus causes 114 million episodes of diarrhoea annually worldwide, resulting in 24 million clinic visits, 2.4 million hospitalisations and an estimated 527,000 deaths in children under five years of age. These deaths predominantly occur in developing countries but rotavirus infection also results in a significant burden of disease in industrialised countries such as Australia. We should be funded as compensation for the conditions under which we conduct our life saving research. Our research is exclusively conducted on human diarrhoeal stool samples. Every year we receive thousands of samples that have to be processed equating to kilograms of faeces (see attached photo). No matter how long you have worked in the research group you never become immune to the smell.

We have encountered stools of every colour and consistency imaginable, from fluorescent pink to jet black. We are often left wondering what parents are feeding their children with samples appearing to contain birdseeds, couch cushion and other unidentifiable objects. We have to endure awkward pauses at social functions and conferences when someone asks “What is the topic of your PhD”, and the inevitable and unoriginal poo jokes that follow. Being known as the group interested in diarrhoea means that when colleagues get food poisoning they often bring in an unrequested sample for analysis.

Thus, this grant would fund research aimed at saving the lives of millions of children worldwide. Part of this grant would fund travel to the 11th International Symposium on Double-Stranded RNA Viruses in Puerto Rico which focuses on viral agents of diarrhoeal disease. It would give students an opportunity to present their research findings at a conference without being ridiculed and to meet world leaders in the field who also live with the stigma of working on diarrhoeal disease.

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