Mick Hitchcock, Ph.D.
Launching His Own Style of Philanthropy to Redefine Research at Nevada

by KEIKO WEIL ’87
Mick Hitchcock is a scientist and a researcher who sees the future through a lens that has research providing the answers to the problems that confront us. Energy, medicine, food, water, he believes, are issues that can be solved with the appropriate application of science. He wants to create science and scientists. And, it is at this lofty objective that the life of this Englishman intersected with the University of Nevada, Reno. Well, that and snowboarding.

Hitchcock has worked for more than 30 years in the bio-pharmaceutical industry. He received his undergraduate and master's degrees in biochemistry at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, and his Ph.D. in microbiology at the University of Melbourne. He worked for more than a decade at Bristol-Myers Squibb on the east coast before joining Gilead, a bio-pharmaceutical company in the Bay Area that advances therapeutics to improve lives.

At Gilead, together with former Bristol colleague John Martin, he developed Viread, approved by the FDA in 2001 as a once-daily pill to treat HIV. Before Viread, a reported 90 percent of AIDS patients had to take as many as a dozen pills throughout the day, suffering side effects including gauntness, anemia and liver damage. Subsequently the pair developed Atripla, approved in 2006 as the first single-tablet regimen for treatment of HIV that includes the active component of Viread and two other drugs. Ease of use made it a popular choice for physicians and patients. More recently, the company launched Suvadi and Harvon, Hepatitis C treatments that can essentially cure most patients with few side effects.

Enter snowboarding. Hitchcock has a passion for the sport and logs more than 50 days of snowboarding a year at resorts all around Lake Tahoe. The back and forth trips over Donner Pass from the Bay Area finally motivated him to buy a home in Reno in 2003. It was then that he first learned that Reno had a university, but his philanthropy did not begin until the government sequestration cuts in 2013. These cuts trimmed grants and threatened to eliminate funding for research students. Hitchcock says of the time, “Having been a graduate student on a grant, I cannot even imagine having the funds cut off mid-way through the process—all that time and effort for nothing. I see the future of our country as a place where we need more scientists, not less. And this was a step in the wrong direction.”

His initial donation provided funding for graduate and undergraduate researchers that would have been lost with the sequestration cuts. He is gratified that three Ph.D. scientists are now in the workforce because of this action, and more are coming. Among these first students, Maggie Tarrant-Elorza received her Ph.D. in 2015 in cellular and molecular biology with a minor in business administration. Her graduate research studied human cytomegalovirus latency. Says Hitchcock, “There is more to it than getting degrees. This research becomes publications and provides labs with fuel for further grants and builds the infrastructure for future research projects and opportunities.”

As Hitchcock delved further into the University’s research programs, he saw great potential. “Having been fascinated with the gold rush and the mining adventures of the mid-1800s, in which northern Nevada featured prominently, I conceptualize a new gold rush for the future, with university research being packaged into small companies that will go on to create value, opportunity and jobs for the local environment. It is already happening, and I hope to help it accelerate,” he says. That, and he considers Reno his adopted home.

To that end, Hitchcock has substantially supported a wide range of projects at Nevada, including renovation of the undergraduate microbiology teaching lab, equipment for the Nevada Newborn Screening Lab and support of the Chemical Ecology Center. He has also provided funding for equipment for the Genomics Center and the Nevada Proteomics Center which will facilitate research across multiple disciplines and programs.

Because of his background in biochemistry and its application in drug discovery and development in 2014 he established the Mick Hitchcock, Ph.D. Endowed Chair in Medical Biochemistry. “This will allow the University to attract a higher level researcher and hopefully create an environment where new pathways and targets for currently intractable diseases become solved. While I see potential for new drugs to come out of this directly or indirectly, training of new doctoral and post-doctoral researchers is also an end product of great value,” says Hitchcock.

But, as he notes, “science and scientists are not enough. Those nascent ideas must be turned into something useful. And this requires the vision and passion of entrepreneurs. Build a company around the idea, develop the material, and then create the value that makes the company successful.” He understands this concept well. Even with no background in business, he has skillfully applied it in the pharmaceutical industry where he keenly understood the need to synthesize all the different areas involved with drug development and to move things along to outcome. While at Gilead he helped build the company from a small biotech with 100 people and no products to the successful organization it is today with over 20 marketed pharmaceuticals and more than 8,500 employees. At Nevada, he recently provided support to the College of Business and its entrepreneurship program, building out the capacity to allow for larger numbers of students to participate in the creative process.

Hitchcock was named a University of Nevada, Reno Foundation Trustee in 2015 where he serves on the Planning and Governance Board and the Audit and Finance Committee. He has been recognized for his philanthropy at the University’s Honor Court where he was inducted as a Founder in 2014 and Philanthropist in 2015.

“Philanthropy is creating a future, creating infrastructure, creating the education to let students go on to do something bigger and better,” says Hitchcock. And, he believes the University is a place where his philanthropy can be impactful. “The future of Reno, the state of Nevada and the world is dependent on scientific discoveries that support the advancement of the standard of living and the economic engine. In a world where it is now fashionable to have beliefs without scientific support, it is only by producing more scientists that we will have a chance to counteract these fallacies and take on the future with an agenda based on facts.”

To learn more about supporting the programs of the University of Nevada, Reno, please contact John Carothers, vice president for development and alumni relations, at jcarothers@ unr.edu or (775) 784-1352.