BEYOND THE WHITE COAT
A legacy by alumna Janet Dora Hine is helping to shed new light on three challenging diseases.

Preventing, treating and curing diseases have traditionally been seen as jobs for medical practitioners and scientists in white coats. But at the University’s Charles Perkins Centre, which opened last year, a new model of research is being adopted that looks very different from the conventional picture of how medical breakthroughs are made.

To tackle three major health problems – obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease – the centre is bringing together experts in basic science and clinical medicine with researchers from a vast array of other disciplines. Many are fields that we do not normally associate with medicine, including agriculture, media studies, public transport and urban planning. Researchers from these diverse areas of study will be working together to devise solutions to some of the toughest research challenges we face.

Now, thanks to a former Challis Bequest Society member, a new chair will help fulfil the centre’s goals by using novel, cross-disciplinary approaches: the Janet Dora Hine Chair of Politics, Governance and Ethics.

It is named in honour of the late Janet Hine (BA ’47), an arts graduate who had a passion for books and human knowledge. After graduation, she worked at the State Library of New
South Wales where she was promoted to Dixson Librarian and then head cataloguer. Janet Hine is regarded as making an important contribution to librarianship and was also an author who penned entries in publications such as the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Following her death last year, she left behind a gift to the University of more than $4 million with no conditions on how it was to be spent. The funds were channelled into the Charles Perkins Centre and have been used to create a chair that is the first of its kind. While other chairs exist at the centre in areas such as nutrition, metabolism and psychology, until now there has been no senior leadership role based in the humanities and social sciences. The Janet Dora Hine Chair is designed to fill this gap.

“It is an explicit recognition that to ease the burden of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease we can’t just treat them as straight biomedical problems,” says Professor Stephen Simpson, academic director of the Charles Perkins Centre.

“We need to understand the full societal and environmental context in which our biology operates. And when considering the design of new interventions, we need to consider how they can be implemented through political and governmental change.” Whoever takes up the chair will grapple with questions such as who is responsible for taking action on issues like obesity, and how to coordinate joint efforts between government, industry and non-government organisations.

And they will need to tease out the ethical dilemmas around intervening in people’s lives to improve their health – for example, whether it is appropriate to regulate unhealthy food or run programs to get children more active. Professor Simpson recently launched an international search to find a star recruit to fill the chair, whose responsibilities will include developing a program of research and teaching, and communicating with the public on the issues at stake.

Meanwhile, research from a humanities and social sciences perspective is already underway at the centre. Last October, an international workshop was held in the field of public health ethics, which examines when public health action is ethically justifiable and weighs the benefits to society against restrictions on individuals. “If we are to make a real difference, then it is absolutely essential that we develop expertise to address what should be done about these diseases as well as expertise on what it is possible to do,” says Professor Paul Griffiths, a philosopher and associate director for humanities and social sciences in the Charles Perkins Centre.

Professor Simpson underlines that philanthropy has played a vital role in the work of the centre so far. Apart from the gift left by Janet Dora Hine, the centre has benefited from the 2011 donation and sale of a $20 million Picasso painting which helped create four of its chairs. Another chair has been funded by the Australian Diabetes Council.

Next, the director hopes to gain additional support so he can attract some of the world’s best up-and-coming young researchers. He believes that philanthropy provides the critical edge that makes world-class research possible.

“It gives us the ability to make decisions that are large in scope and truly visionary,” he says. “It allows us to be brave.”

If you would like to read more about the Charles Perkins Centre, please visit sydney.edu.au/perkins