Interview

with Samantha Higgins, Quality Manager of Victorian Cancer Biobank

By Maggie Ling – 16 December, 2020

Samantha is currently the Quality Manager of the Victorian Cancer Biobank (VCB). She has 14+ years of experience working as a Scientist in ISO-accredited forensic laboratories. She holds a BSc (Pathology) and MSc (Biomedical Science) from The University of Melbourne and has extensive experience with ISO-accredited laboratory and building redevelopment, document management and improving Quality Management Systems.

Congratulations on the Victorian Cancer Biobank achieving CTRNet Certification. Can you tell us what CTRNet certification is, and what it means for the VCB?

CTRNet certification is an internationally recognised biobanking certification program offered by the Canadian Tissue Repository Network in Canada. The CTRNet has developed a comprehensive set of required operational practices covering all aspects of biobanking - from ethics and governance best practices, through to high-quality biospecimen and data collection, processing and storage.

To achieve CTRNet certification a biobank must undergo an external audit of operational practices against standardised CTRNet requirements, as well as requiring all staff participate in an education program of Biobanking Best Practice. At its core, the program involves VCB committing to adopting the CTRNet operational practices as our own common standards of practice, something that over 300 biobanks globally have also committed to.

Although the VCB has operated a networked, high-quality biobanking service for a number of years across metropolitan Melbourne, this is the first time VCB has undertaken an external quality assessment. With the CTRNet certification, we can further demonstrate to our stakeholders from patients through to researchers that the VCB provides a harmonised, professional biobanking service.

You recently joined the VCB as the Quality Manager. Can you tell us about your background and how you have found the role so far?

I commenced at VCB Central Operations in April this year. Transitioning to the role was unique as I joined the team only in a 'virtual' capacity during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The staff across the VCB network have been incredibly supportive thus far, and from day one it has been clear there is a strong culture of maintaining biospecimen quality and integrity that will continue to be the foundation for our quality program.

My professional background is in accredited forensic pathology laboratories and donor tissue banking. The role of Quality Manager at VCB brings together my passions in ethical participant engagement, laboratory and process innovation as well as collaboration to an organisation with a mission close to my heart: that is, to improve cancer research and patient outcomes.

Biobanking - particularly for a hospital-integrated network of tissue banks as at VCB– is one of the most interdisciplinary professions I have encountered in my career. The timely collection, safe storage and approved release of biospecimens and data across a harmonised network requires continued synchronisation of each of our hospital-integrated tissue banks to ensure our donor participants and client expectations continue to be met or exceeded. Engaging daily with staff and stakeholders who work towards this common goal has been both rewarding and inspiring.

In your opinion, what is going to be the role of Quality Management in the biobanking industry going to look like the next 5-10 years?

Cancer research is currently challenged by the need to produce reproducible and validated research while constantly adapting to advancements in patient care, personalised medicine, biomarker discovery, and so forth. The VCB has an important role to play in ensuring we remain a trusted biobanking platform that ensures high quality biospecimens and associated clinical data while remaining adaptive to industry innovations and researchers needs.

The release in 2018 of an international ISO-standard specifically for the biobanking industry [ISO-20387 Biotechnology – General requirements for biobanking], has set a new benchmark in Biobank Quality Management. Already we are seeing a global trend towards adoption of ISO-20387 for best practice across operations. I anticipate that biobanking will now follow what I have witnessed in pathology and organ and tissue banking over the past fifteen years, and that accredited, quality-assured practices will transform the industry from how we know it today.