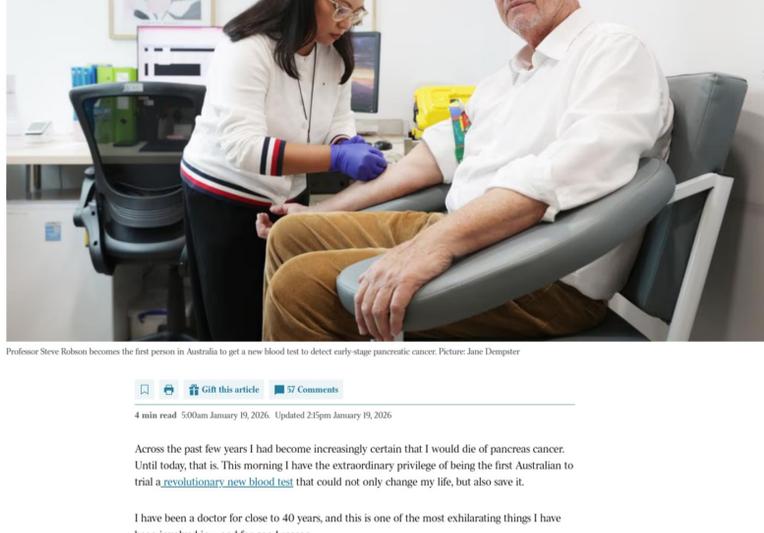


# One needle prick to start the next generation of cancer care

With one blood test today, I will be part of the start of a revolution in cancer care in Australia. This is how it happened.

By STEVE ROBSON

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Professor Steve Robson becomes the first person in Australia to get a new blood test to detect early-stage pancreatic cancer. Picture: Jane Dempster

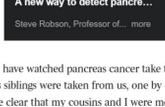
4 min read 5:00am January 19, 2026. Updated 2:5pm January 19, 2026

Across the past few years I had become increasingly certain that I would die of pancreas cancer. Until today, that is. This morning I have the extraordinary privilege of being the first Australian to trial a [revolutionary new blood test](#) that could not only change my life, but also save it.

I have been a doctor for close to 40 years, and this is one of the most exhilarating things I have been involved in – and for good reason.

[Pancreas cancer is the most lethal](#) of all the common malignant tumours. By the time an unlucky victim discovers that the disease is growing deep within them, it usually is too late. Many of these cancers are inoperable and [attempts to tame them with traditional chemotherapy treatment fail](#) [dismally](#).

Death from pancreas cancer is often nightmarish, not only for the victim but also for their family and loved ones. In an age where the outlook for cancer is improving all the time – to the point where cure is now common – few survive pancreas cancer.



A new way to detect pancre...  
Steve Robson, Professor of... more

During the past two decades I have watched pancreas cancer take the lives of my father's generation. Five of my father's siblings were taken from us, one by one, in the most cruel ways. As the losses continued it became clear that my cousins and I were members of one of Australia's high-risk cancer families.

It is difficult to overstate the anxiety that [such a situation creates](#). For me, that great fear is for my own children. The idea that I could have [passed on to them the genes](#) for something so terrible is almost too much to bear. Today, though, these dark thoughts began to dissipate for the first time.

This new test for the earliest stages of pancreas cancer has been tailor-made for people at high risk of the disease, like me and my family. What is all the more incredible is that the technology that underpins the test is something with which I am very familiar indeed – pregnancy testing.

## The Avantect pancreatic cancer detection blood test

**When is it available?**  
The Avantect test will be available to people at high risk of pancreatic cancer from January 19.

**Where will the test be available?**  
The test will initially be available at the Sydney Breast Clinic, with further distribution centres nationwide in coming months.

**How much does the test cost?**  
The test initially costs \$1495 and is not covered under Medicare.

**Who is the test suitable for?**  
The test is recommended for people at high risk of pancreas cancer. You can check your risk via Pankind's Family History Checker: <https://familychecker.pankind.org.au>

**How can I inquire?**  
BCAL will soon launch a dedicated telehealth service in early 2026 to connect interested individuals with qualified clinicians for early-detection consultations.

You can register at [earlydetection.com.au](http://earlydetection.com.au)

The new test can detect the earliest stages of pancreas cancer from fragments of abnormal DNA in the bloodstream. If this sounds familiar, well, it should. For more than a decade the same techniques have been used by hundreds of thousands of Australian women in pregnancy. How could a common pregnancy screening test be flipped to become a test for cancer?

The non-invasive pre-natal test, or NIPT, is offered to pregnant women in Australia as a way to check for chromosomal conditions in their unborn babies. The DNA that is detected in the bloodstream of pregnant women does not come from the baby itself but from the baby's placenta, rapidly growing as the pregnancy progresses.



The author's uncle, Hugh Robson, who died of pancreatic cancer in 2023, with his wife, Maureen.



Hugh and Maureen on their wedding day.

It was the finding of abnormal test results in otherwise uncomplicated pregnancies that led to a startling discovery. Some women who had strange and otherwise unexplained NIPT results were later found to have unsuspected cancers. Like their baby's placenta, the hidden but growing tumour had thrown off DNA into the women's bloodstream.

At the time these discoveries were first made, I was president of the College of Obstetricians. We were in the throes of making sure that the NIPT was being used appropriately in pregnancy care. I was surprised and curious then about hidden cancers showing up in otherwise routine pregnancy tests, but thought it a curiosity and nothing more.

Fast forward a decade. An established and trusted technology has been turned on its head and now offers hope to people who, until now, had felt hopeless. People like me and my family. This exciting breakthrough demonstrates just how important a role basic science research plays in healthcare.



Arthur Robson was the first of his generation of Robson siblings to die of pancreas cancer, in February 2007, at 64.

Gordon Robson, a former senior public servant, died of pancreatic cancer at 90.

There has been enormous pessimism about the outlook for people with pancreas cancer for my entire medical career. When I was taught surgery and pathology as a medical student in the early 1980s, pancreas cancer was whispered about, too terrible a condition to spend a lot of time on, it seemed that all people could do when they faced the diagnosis was to get their affairs in order.

How times change. Breakthroughs in treatment, such as the molecular testing of tumours undertaken by Australia's brilliant Omico facility and others, are delivering hope where there was none. We now even are hearing of the potential for cures in [advanced pancreas cancer](#).

There is a huge amount of good news for people who are at high risk of pancreas cancer. The key to survival, however, is finding the tumour in its earliest stages before it has spread. Once spread, pancreas cancer is like a voracious predator that will not stop. This is where this new test comes in, and why I am thrilled to be a part of its development.



Eric Robson, a former navy officer who was honoured with a Queen's bravery award for saving lives during the Voyager disaster, died at 65 with pancreatic cancer.

The only girl among her siblings, Patricia McCaig died in 2009 at the age 83. She also had pancreas cancer.

People like me who are at high risk of developing pancreas cancer currently are offered tests such as MRI and invasive ultrasound to look for early stages of the disease. There is no doubt that these are useful, but they can be prone to misdiagnosis. They may identify changes that are not necessarily cancerous but that lead to complex and invasive diagnostic procedures.

All medical tests have pros and cons. I find the new blood test appealing because the samples can be taken anywhere and only a very small number of cells need to change to register an abnormality. The expertise required for complex imaging techniques often is restricted to a few sites. That said, if a blood test returns a worrying result, further testing will be needed.

A decade ago I had the privilege of helping to usher in the age of NIPT in pregnancy. Now I find myself at the cutting edge of a new revolution, only as a patient rather than a practitioner this time. That, too, is an enormous privilege. I want to do anything I can to offer more certainty, more security and more hope to people living with cancer risk.

There is plenty of work yet to do, the introduction of this technology as NIPT in pregnancy took many years. Yet today it feels so routine as to be unremarkable. I am hoping that the next revolution in cancer care finds its place, too. For me, it's personal. For my family and our children, I desperately want to say, "It stops with us."

Steve Robson is professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the Australian National University and former president of the Australian Medical Association. He is a board member of the National Health and Medical Research Council.

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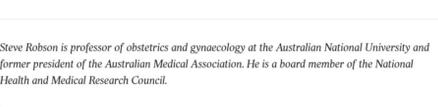
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