Dr Janya Grainok and Dr Ianthe Pitout work in the lab. photo by Trevor Collens Trevor Collens Credit: Trevor Collens/The West Australian

Two Shenton Park doctors develop world's first drug to stop blindness in those with rare type of eye disease

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Two young Shenton Park doctors have developed the world's first drug to stop those with a rare type of eye disease from going blind.

What started as research for individual PhDs has grown into something much bigger than Vision Pharma co-inventors Janya Grainok, 35, and Ianthe Pitout, 37, could have ever expected.

"I never dreamt that what we did back then would have such an impact. It's incredible to think we could prevent people from going blind, and it came out of our PhD so it had

The doctors, along with WA Lions Eye Institute ophthalmologist Dr Fred Chen and PYC Therapeutics' chief scientific officer Professor Sue Fletcher, developed a drug to treat the blinding eye disease retinitis pigmentosa type 11.

The lifesaving drug dubbed VP-001 has been described as "precision medicine" which will work to prevent the "progressive loss of vision" seen in patients with RP11.

Vision Pharma Ltd was last week named 2021 Western Australian Innovator of the Year for developing the world-first treatment. It was awarded $70,000, which the Nedlands-based biotech company said would go to the Lions Eye Institute for the purpose of running genetic testing on patients with RP.

This will tell patients which type of RP they have and inform the Lions Eye Institute which patients will be eligible for upcoming clinical testing of the drug.

People living with the rare type of eye disease usually lose their night vision during childhood, then peripheral vision in early adulthood, and reach total blindness when they are between 40 and 50 years old.

Vision Pharma co-inventors Ianthe Pitout and Janya Grainok. Credit: Trevor Collens/The West Australian

Before VP-001 was invented by the Vision Pharma team there was no treatment available for patients with RP11 but the new medicine aims to "halt the disease progression".

knowing where it would go," Dr Pitout said.

According to Vision Pharma, the drug has shown to be effective in "retina-in-a dish models" derived from patients with RP11.

Dr Pitout said the rare type of RP affected one in 60,000 people, with those with parents who both have the gene at a 50-50 risk of being diagnosed.

"The best we can do is to stop degeneration – it would delay the loss of vision or slow down or stop or inhibit the loss," Dr Pitout said.

Dr Pitout and Dr Grainok could not say when the drug would be available on the market but said it was set to undergo clinical trials in WA.

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