Dynamic donors play a key role in advancing arthritis research

Tony Fell and Bryce Douglas are instrumental in campaign progress and results

David Israelson

Bryce Douglas, left, and Tony Fell.

No one will ever accuse Tony Fell and Bryce Douglas of not thinking big.

They are a dynamic duo – founding co-chairs of the Campaign to Cure Arthritis in support of the Arthritis Program at Toronto Western Hospital and keenly supportive of the leading-edge research being done at the Krembil Research Institute.

"One thing we like about the arthritis scientists at Krembil is that they are in the vanguard of a lot of this research," Mr. Fell says.

In addition to co-chairing the Campaign to Cure Arthritis, Mr. Douglas and his wife Nicki have provided a significant gift to establish the Nicki and Bryce Douglas Chair of Orthopaedic Surgery. Mr. Fell and his wife Shari have also donated a significant amount to support research aimed at curing arthritis, so people will no longer require hip, joint and knee replacements.

It is a personal connection to arthritis that has motivated both Mr. Fell and Mr. Douglas to actively support arthritis research and care.

"Arthritis in its different forms handicaps millions of Canadians, including my family," says Mr. Douglas, the former deputy chairman and managing director of RBC Dominion Securities Inc. "When I heard that there was a group of innovative research scientists trying to find ways to cure this problem, it was something I wanted to get involved in," he says.

More than 4.6 million Canadians are affected by arthritis; osteoarthritis is the third-leading cause of disability in the country. Canada spends more than $21 billion on arthritis care each year (including 100,000 joint replacements).

"Arthritis has an impact on peoples' lives. It impacts the economy in terms of lost jobs and it has been costing the healthcare system huge amounts of money," says Mr. Douglas, who enjoyed a 41-year career with RBC Capital Markets and its predecessor, Dominion Securities.

"The clinicians and researchers are looking at two potential cures. The first is through stem cell research. They will be developing techniques for growing live tissue and cartilage that can be injected into the joints, making joint replacement obsolete," explains Mr. Fell, the retired chairman of RBC Capital Markets who enjoyed a 48-year career with that firm and Dominion Securities.

Human trials are underway already. "But we have to recognize that this is a long-term program," Mr. Fell says.

The second potential cure revolves around last year's world-first discovery at Krembil of biomarkers for spinal osteoarthritis. It marks the beginning of attempts to create a test for osteoarthritis that can diagnose the disease early.

"These are big ideas. Our goal is to cure this debilitating disease or stop it before it starts," Mr. Fell says.

Mr. Douglas is well aware how monumental it would be to find a cure.

"It impacts on your whole lifestyle, whether it's going for a walk, playing tennis, playing with your kids and your grandchildren. I can tell you. It really hurts," he says.

Mr. Fell notes that "7 per cent of all hospital costs in Canada come from joint replacements. How many people do we all know who have had them?"

The clinicians and researchers of the Arthritis Program have personally pledged $3 million of their own money toward the program.

"When you get that sort of commitment, it's hard to say no [to supporting that]," Mr. Fell says. ■