Olivia Newton-John
Cancer Research Institute

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Applicant Name: James Checco
Applicant eRA Commons UserName: CHECCO
Finding Opportunity Announcement (FAO): PA-14-149

11/18/2015

To Whom it May Concern,

Doug Fairlie, PhD

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I am writing in support of James Checco's application for an NIH NRSA Postdoctoral Fellowship. I am currently a Group Leader at the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute in Melbourne, Australia. I first came into contact with James in 2011, through an on-going collaboration I have with James' PhD supervisor, Professor Sam Gellman, who recommended James as a participant in a joint project we were working on at that time. Since then, my professional involvement with James expanded significantly, and he was one of my closest collaborators on a larger project (part of his PhD studies) that was driven largely by him. Since he graduated, I have maintained contact with James, and am aware on his newly-commenced postdoctoral studies. Due to this involvement, I have first-hand knowledge of James' abilities and potential and have no hesitation whatsoever in recommending him for this fellowship.

I regard James' ability and potential to become an independent researcher as outstanding. James was been the primary chemist on a number of projects on which we have worked together. The quality of his work in this regard was superb. He always displayed meticulous attention to detail, and I was always able to rely on the quality of the reagents that he has provided to my lab. I was particularly impressed with his enthusiasm for these projects and his willingness to supply more material for additional experiments etc that might benefit the final outcomes of the project. His perseverance with difficult syntheses or experiments was admirable, and his ability to trouble-shoot problems he encountered was exemplary.

Our combined efforts resulted in joint authorship on a paper in the highly regarded journal *ChemBioChem* on which James was a middle author. The success of this paper was largely dependent on the high quality reagents provided by James. Moreover, on another larger project, that was largely driven by James, we established new strategies for enabling non-natural peptides to cross cell membranes. James' original and creative ideas were central to achieving these goals and led to the successful development of a number of novel reagents that will be of significant interest to researchers within this field. This work was recently published in one

of the premier Chemistry journals (*JACS*) with James as the first author on this paper.

Due to the geographical distance between our groups, most of our communication has been written. In this regard I found James to be brilliant. He regularly provided Powerpoint presentations that beautifully updated us his latest ideas, data and plans for future experiments. In fact I now use these presentations as a "template" for how I want my own students to present their data and ideas. His excellent writing skills were also evident to me in the preparation of our joint manuscripts and displayed a deep knowledge of the subject and literature. Unfortunately I have not been able to see/hear James present his work orally so cannot comment on this.

James' training to date has been mostly Chemistry-based though he has also shown his capacity to do more biological experiments such as confocal microscopy on live cells. As such, his recent move to start his first postdoctoral position in Professor Sweedler's lab should allow him to expand his knowledge and skills in some state-of-the-art analytical techniques, and enable him to gain additional experience handling biological materials. I think this is a fine choice of labs in which to embark on the next stage of his career. Indeed, his choice to move to this lab was highly strategic for James' highly focused ambitions to lead an independent research group working at the chemistry-biology interface. For someone at such an early stage in their career, his future goals are unusually well-formed, and I have no doubt he will be successful in these endeavours.

In summary, James is one of the most talented graduate students I have had the pleasure to work with over the years, both within Australia and in the US through my long collaboration with the Gellman lab. As such I very highly recommend him for this prestigious fellowship.

Yours Sincerely

Dr W. Douglas Fairlie PhD

Group Leader
Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute