



RESEARCH: Tall Poppy science award winner Nikki Verrills. — Picture by Jonathan Carroll

## Researcher hits medical heights

By **GABRIEL WINGATE-PEARSE**

A HUNTER-based medical biochemist working on cancer research is keen to pass on her passion for science to high school students.

Dr Nikki Verrills, one of 13 people to receive a Young Tall Poppy Science Award, will visit high schools across the state to talk about her research and inspire students.

Her work involves using latest molecular biology

techniques to identify the genes and proteins that are altered in cancer cells and potentially cause or contribute to cancer growth.

"Once I identify a new gene, or protein, altered in cancer, I insert that gene into normal cells to see if they cause cancer," Dr Verrills said yesterday.

"I also use molecular or pharmacological tools to inhibit that gene, to determine if such inhibition kills the cancer cells."

Dr Verrills has worked in the field for nine years and focuses

on prostate cancer, the most common cancer in men, breast cancer, which is the most common cancer in women, and leukaemia in children.

"My research concentrates on these three cancers [but] our discoveries are relevant to all types of cancer," she said.

"By understanding how these cancers develop and identifying the molecular differences between cancer cells and normal cells, we are identifying new ways to treat cancer."