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STATE STEM CELL AGENCY FUNDS TRAINING GRANTS FIRST AWARDED LAST YEAR; UCLA'S STEM CELL INSTITUTE RECEIVES \$1.23 MILLION

The state agency overseeing the stem cell research mandated by the passage of Proposition 71 has partially funded a series of grants awarded last September, officials from the California Institute of Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) announced today.

In all, 16 non-profit institutions in California received \$12.1 million to train the next generation of stem cell researchers in the first grants awarded by the California stem cell agency. The UCLA Institute for Stem Cell Biology and Medicine (ISCBM) received \$1,231,802, the largest amount awarded by CIRM, in the first installment of a \$3.75-million training grant approved in September.

UCLA stem cell institute officials said today they are pleased the grant has been partially funded after a seven-month delay prompted by legal challenges that impeded the state's ability to sell approved general obligation bonds. The money will help prepare the best and brightest UCLA scientists who will be conducting this leading-edge research.

"Our program's aim is to train basic scientists, engineers and physicians to become leaders in stem cell research and this grant will help us do that," said Dr. Owen Witte, director of the UCLA stem cell institute, a professor of microbiology, immunology and molecular genetics and a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator. "These scientists will be trained from a multidisciplinary perspective, which is a distinctive feature of UCLA's program."

The ISCBM will train 16 pre-doctoral, post-doctoral and clinical research scholars. Each will be offered various training options, including working with faculty leaders in cell and molecular biology, gene medicine, cell-based therapies and organ transplantation. Witte said the training program also will accommodate those interested in the social, legal, ethical or policy aspects of stem cell research.

While the grant money will bolster UCLA's stem cell program, the people of California will benefit most, said Judith C. Gasson, an ISCBM co-director.

"This will help us provide high-quality training in the scientific, clinical, social and ethical aspects of stem cell research to the scientists and clinicians developing the future therapies in this rapidly emerging field," said Gasson, who also is director of UCLA's Jonsson Cancer Center.

The ISCBM's grant application was among the highest rated, and the institute was the only one to receive the maximum funding available. UCLA's research focus includes HIV/AIDS, cancer, neurological disorders, bone and cardiac disease and metabolic disorders such as diabetes.

Funding for the grants came from the sale of \$14 million of bond anticipation notes (BANs) to six California philanthropic entities, CIRM officials said. The California Stem Cell Research and Cures Finance Committee approved the BANs last week.

“This is an exhilarating day for the scientists, patients and the millions of Californians who support stem cell research,” said Robert Klein, chairman of the Independent Citizens’ Oversight Committee (ICOC), the agency’s governing board. “CIRM was created to fund science in the service of therapies, and today we’re making our first grants. These grants are an investment in human capital. Patients can celebrate today because the flow of funds has started to the physicians and scientists who have dedicated their lives to this pioneering field that holds such promise for reducing human suffering.”

For patients suffering from chronic illness and injury, the training program is “an important signal of hope to come from California,” said patient advocate and ICOC board member Jonathan Shestack.

“The rising tide of knowledge from stem cell science will lift all those suffering with chronic conditions,” Shestack said. “We look forward to brighter days ahead. Still it’s important to know that this is just the beginning. Those of us who have cast our vote and live with people we love who are suffering and cut off from the world wait the full funding of Proposition 71. I don’t want my son’s future held hostage to someone else’s ideology anymore.”

The six philanthropic entities that agreed to purchase the bond anticipation notes are Beneficus Foundation, \$2 million; Blum Capital Partners LP, \$1 million; William K. Bowes Foundation, \$2 million; the Broad Foundation, \$2 million; Jacobs Family Trust, \$5 million; and the Moores Foundation, \$2 million.

The Institute for Stem Cell Biology and Medicine was launched on March 6, 2005, with a UCLA commitment of \$20 million over five years. The institute brings together geneticists, engineers, ethicists, chemists, policy experts, pathologists, immunologists, oncologists, hematologists and scientists from other disciplines to uncover the mysteries of the growth and development of adult and embryonic stem cells. The institute is a collaboration of the David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA’s Jonsson Cancer Center, the Henry Samueli School of Engineering and Applied Science and the UCLA College.