The Leader

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A campus newspaper for faculty, staff and students at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston

Two Gifts Add $35 Million to IMM Campaign

By Amber Buckley, *Development*

The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston has received its largest philanthropic gift ever — a 10-year, $25 million anonymous commitment to stem cell research at The Brown Foundation Institute of Molecular Medicine for the Prevention of Human Diseases (IMM). In addition, Memorial Hermann Healthcare System has pledged $10 million for molecular medicine research.

The UT Health Science Center at Houston is seeking $200 million in philanthropic dollars to build and equip a new home for the institute, to recruit and support additional scientists, and to expand its research into the molecular causes of common human diseases.

The anonymous donor, a grateful patient of James T. Willerson, M.D., cardiologist and president of the UT Health Science Center at Houston, has designated the gift for continued scientific discovery related to stem cell biology.

"This transforming gift will allow us to recruit an internationally respected leader in this field, who will work with us to create a world-class center for stem cell research," Willerson said. "This incredible commitment is a landmark event, not only for the university, but also for stem cell research in the Texas Medical Center."

Willerson explained that recruitment soon will be under way to bring to Houston a stem cell scientist who will create and lead the center dedicated to fundamental biologic research into how stem

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Willerson Leads Stem Cell Clinical Trial to Treat Heart Failure

By Scott Merville, *Public Affairs*

UT Health Science Center President James T. Willerson, M.D., with collaborators at the Texas Heart Institute at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital, will lead one of the nation's first clinical trials of stem cell therapy for heart failure patients.

At a March 23 news conference at Texas Heart Institute, Willerson joined Emerson Perin, M.D., Ph.D., director of New Cardiovascular Interventional Technology at THI, and Yong J. Geng, M.D., Ph.D., director of the UT Medical School's Center for Cardiovascular Biology and Atherosclerosis Research, to announce that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved the clinical trial.

Edward T. H. Yeh, M.D., director of the Research Center for Cardiovascular Disease at the Brown Foundation Institute of Molecular Medicine for the Prevention of Human Diseases and chairman of The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center Department of Cardiology, also was present at the THI news conference. His

Clinical trial leaders, left to right, James T. Willerson, M.D., Emerson Perin, M.D., Ph.D., Yong J. Geng, M.D., Ph.D., and Edward T. H. Yeh, M.D., at the news conference announcing FDA approval of a stem cell clinical trial for heart failure.

research has shown that injecting stem cells found in human blood into the left ventricles of mice resulted in some of the stem cells differentiating into heart muscle cells, smooth muscle cells and cells that line blood vessels.

"We are very excited about the FDA approval to begin this work in the Texas Medical Center at the Texas Heart Institute and St. Luke's. We believe stem cell therapies will find a very important place in the future treatment of patients with heart and vascular disease," Willerson said.

The Houston study builds on earlier research by Willerson, Perin, Geng, and Hans Dohmann, M.D., and his colleagues at the Pro-Cardiaco Hospital in Rio de Janeiro. The Brazil clinical trial involved 21 patients suffering from severe heart failure.

Perin threaded a special catheter through an artery into the patient's left ventricle (the heart's main pumping chamber) and mapped specific areas of muscle damage. He then used the catheter to inject stem cells derived from the patient's bone marrow into the damaged heart muscle. Two million stem cells were injected in 15 sites for a total of 30 million stem cells in each patient. The same procedure will be used in Houston.

After two months, the hearts of the treated patients in Brazil had significantly less failure and pain, and were more able to pump blood than those of the untreated patients. The treated group also tended to do better on treadmill tests. At four months, the treated patients had a sustained improvement in their hearts' pumping power and ability to supply blood throughout the body. None of the treated patients had serious problems such as sustained irregular rhythms, heart attack or death during or soon after the procedure.

The first phase of the THI study, which involves six patients, is designed to test for safety. After the FDA approves that phase, the study will focus on the efficacy of the treatment.

New Council Focuses on Importance of Diversity to the Health Science Center

By Pamela Lewis, *Public Affairs*

"Diversity is a priority for the Health Science Center," says L. Maximilian Buja, M.D., executive vice president for Academic Affairs and chair of the new Institutional Diversity Council. "Diversity not only encompasses the traditional associations with gender, race, sexual orientation, religious preference, but it also goes well beyond that to encompass the diversity of individual approaches to creativity and contributions that each person can make to this institution."

In 2002, President James T. Willerson, M.D., confirmed his strong support for diversity and commissioned the development of an Institutional Diversity Plan to strengthen the health science center's commitment to diversity. Institutional groups, including the Core Committee for the Advancement of Minorities and Women, the Committee on the Status of Women and the Multicultural Affairs Committee, reviewed the plan in August 2003. The review was facilitated by Linda Brannon, associate vice president for Academic Affairs.

Following endorsement by Willerson and Michael McKinney, M.D., senior executive vice president and chief operating officer, Buja, Brannon and Yolanda Davis (see related article, p. 2), director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity for the health science center, developed a comprehensive, diverse roster of individuals to serve on the council (see list at http://www.uth.tmc.edu/council/divcouncil.html).

The Institutional Diversity Plan calls for a broad perspective on diversity — focusing on "where we stand and the actions we need to take to enhance diversity at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston," Buja says.

Davis emphasizes the benefits of diversity. "We are a mosaic culture at the health science center," she says, "and we should celebrate that. Individuals from different backgrounds bring new ways of looking at problems. They bring richness to health care, research and education that is not available to institutions with a less diverse culture."

The Institutional Diversity Plan has eight components:

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Administrative Talents Send McNiel from School of Nursing to Medical School

By Pamela Lewis, *Public Affairs*

Nancy McNiel, Ph.D., associate dean for management at the School of Nursing for the past 13 years, was appointed Director of Administration at the Medical School, effective April 12. During the last several years, in addition to other budget, administrative and management duties, McNiel has been instrumental in moving forward the construction of the School of Nursing and Student Community Center, which is scheduled to open in June.

"Dr. McNiel's talents in administration have been well honed during her tenure at the School of Nursing," said Kevin Dillon, executive vice president for Finance and Business Affairs. "In addition, her shepherding of the School of Nursing and Student Community Center during the design and construction process will stand her and the Medical School in good stead in dealing

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Inside:

It's Coming Your Way

Help our students reach for the stars by supporting student scholarships. The third Annual Adopt-A-Student Employee Campaign begins May 1 and runs through June 15. Watch for your Adopt-A-Student Campaign brochure, arriving soon by inter-institutional mail.

The University of Texas
Health Science Center at Houston