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Press Release

UCI stem cell researcher awarded \$1.4 million to study Huntington's disease

Second award goes to study for treatment of retinitis pigmentosa

Irvine, Calif., June 30, 2008

The governing board of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, the state's stem cell agency, Friday awarded nearly \$1.5 million to UC Irvine researchers under two separate grant programs. One will fund research for the development of new lines of human stem cells, and the other will fund the planning stages of innovative research teams that will collaborate on therapies for disease.

Leslie M. Thompson, psychiatry and human behavior associate professor with joint appointments in neurobiology and behavior and biological chemistry, was awarded nearly \$1.4 million to develop new stem cell lines for use in treating Huntington's disease. She received an additional \$54,618 disease team planning grant to coordinate the Huntington's disease study. The neurodegenerative disease causes physical impairment, psychiatric symptoms and cognitive dysfunction and usually strikes at middle age. It inevitably leads to death and currently there is no treatment or cure.

"We are thrilled that these grants were awarded," she said. "The cell lines will enable us to better understand how the disease starts and progresses and to test new drugs to stop it. The disease team approach allows us to harness diverse expertise across the state of California. We are grateful for the support and involvement of the patient community and their efforts in raising awareness of HD."

UCI researchers joining Thompson in the new cell line study include Peter Donovan, biological chemistry and developmental and cell biology professor, and Sue and Bill Gross Stem Cell Research Center co-director; Hans Keirstead, anatomy and neurobiology professor, and Sue



Leslie M. Thompson

and Bill Gross Stem Cell Research Center co-director; and Dr. Neal Hermanowicz, health sciences clinical professor and Movement Disorders Program director. The disease team planning group includes those researchers and J. Lawrence Marsh, developmental and cell biology professor.

A second disease team planning grant for \$37,367 went to Dr. Henry Klassen, a UCI ophthalmologist, who is looking into the use of stem cells to treat retinitis pigmentosa, a disease that destroys light-sensing cells in the retina causing blindness. Klassen plans to use modified stem cells to both secrete a growth factor for light-sensing cells and to develop into those cells themselves.

The relatively modest disease team planning grants allow scientists to assemble multi-disciplinary teams that will prepare proposals for major clinical trial grants. The goal is to fund disease teams whose work will result in a therapy or diagnostic tool for a particular disease or serious injury.

In all, CIRM awarded \$24 million to 25 California institutions.

"California, through CIRM, is leading the world in providing funding for innovative stem cell research," said Susan V. Bryant, vice chancellor for research at UCI, "and it is thrilling to see our UCI faculty competing so successfully for these awards."

Dr. Alan Trounson, president of CIRM, said the ultimate goal "is to apply the knowledge gained in basic research toward treatments and cures for patients."

About the University of California, Irvine: The University of California, Irvine is a top-ranked university dedicated to research, scholarship and community service. Founded in 1965, UCI is among the fastest-growing University of California campuses, with more than 27,000 undergraduate and graduate students and nearly 2,000 faculty members. The third-largest employer in dynamic Orange County, UCI contributes an annual economic impact of \$3.6 billion. For more UCI news, visit www.today.uci.edu.

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