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Stem cell study grants awarded

State-run TEDCO hands out \$23 million for 62 projects, mostly at JHU and UM

BY JONATHAN BOR

Maryland has handed out its second round of grants for stem cell research, awarding a total of \$23 million for 62 projects ranging from basic studies of the cells' properties to potential therapies for human disease.

All but one of the grants will support work at the Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland, with a remaining award going to the Kennedy Krieger Institute.

Last year, the Maryland Technology Development Corporation (TEDCO) handed out \$15 million in grants, an amount set by legislation passed the previous year by the Maryland General Assembly. Subsequent legislation raised this year's grant total by \$8 million.

While the program's original impetus was to help scientists hamstrung by federal funding restrictions on research involving human embryos, the state grants also support studies of stem cells from adult tissues and cancers.

Scientists will use the money to explore treatments for Lou Gehrig's disease, liver disease, cartilage damage, breast and brain cancer and other afflictions.

In awarding this year's grant, the stem cell commission placed a heavier emphasis than before on so-called translational research - studies that can lead more directly to therapies.

"Even when doing basic research, we wanted researchers already to be thinking about how helpful it would be in the clinic," said Linda Powers, chairwoman of the Maryland Stem Cell Research Commission, which reviewed applications and sent its recommendations to TEDCO.

Eleven of the grants, totaling \$1.5 million each for three years of work, went to well-established researchers who could present data showing the promise of their proposals.

"These are not puny awards," said Johns Hopkins neurologist Jeffrey Rothstein, explaining that they are comparable in size to National Institutes of Health awards. "These are grants that can make things happen."

Rothstein will use his money to screen drugs for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a degenerative and fatal nerve disorder also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. To see if drugs are effective, he will administer them to nerve cells derived from both embryonic stem cells and fetal cells.

An additional 34 awards were two-year "exploratory grants" for \$200,000 to support scientists new to the stem cell research who are pursuing work that runs against dogma, Powers said.

Seventeen grants - \$110,000 for two years of work - went to young scientists.

Scientists outside Maryland reviewed the grant applications and sent their scores to Maryland's stem cell commission.

In making its recommendation, the commission considered the highest-rated applications with an eye also toward achieving a balance among medical institutions, diseases and tissue types.

All told, 45 grants went to the Johns Hopkins University, including both the medical school and the Homewood campus. Sixteen went to the University of Maryland, including the medical school, biotechnology institute and main campus in College Park.

jonathan.bor@baltsun.com

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