

Taubman puts \$5M into ALS research

Retail mogul is also donating share of book royalties to U-M study of Lou Gehrig's disease.

Sofia Kosmetatos / The Detroit News

Research into the causes and treatment of Lou Gehrig's disease is getting a boost from retail mogul and philanthropist A. Alfred Taubman, who is donating \$5 million and his share of the royalties from his new book, "Threshold Resistance," to the University of Michigan.

The gift will support research led by U-M neurologist and scientist Dr. Eva Feldman, who heads the U-M Program for Neurology Research and Discovery. The lab has already received \$2 million from Taubman, who lost a good friend -- New York Sen. Jacob Javits -- to ALS 20 years ago.

Taubman is founder of Bloomfield Hills-based Taubman Centers Inc., a national real estate developer and operator of high-end shopping centers, including three in Metro Detroit.

Lou Gehrig's disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), causes nerve cells to weaken and die. The disease specifically attacks motor neurons, which transmit signals through the body that allow us to move.

"It's hard to imagine a more devastating disease," Taubman said, noting that Michigan has one of the highest ALS incidence rates in the country. He wants Feldman to build on the momentum of her work.

Feldman's team will work with researchers at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine on several scientific fronts to try to stop or slow the disease. Their work will include research on animals and patients. They will look at:

- Genetic tools to keep nerve cells from dying;

- New ways of delivering drugs and genes directly into nerve cells;

- A potential treatment based on injecting stem cells into the spinal cord.

The latter approach will require the use of human embryonic stem cells and will be tested at the UC San Diego School of Medicine. Dr. Martin Marsala, an associate professor of anesthesiology at UC San Diego, is leading that project. His lab has received additional funding from the California Stem Cell Initiative for his work on spinal cord injury.

For Feldman, the collaboration with UC San Diego and Taubman's donation will allow her to venture into a new and promising area of research with embryonic stem cells.

Marsala has studied the use of stem cells to treat spinal injuries caused by interruptions in blood flow. They have already performed preliminary research on animals and Marsala said he expects human trials with embryonic stem cells could proceed in four to five years.

Many scientists say the stem cells derived from embryos have a greater potential for developing into treatments than adult stem cells.

But Michigan prohibits the destruction of these cells for research purposes and is considered to have among the most restrictive laws in the country regarding stem cell research.

Opponents of embryonic stem cell research consider research using embryonic stem cells unethical and argue that research on adult stem cells is finding cures, too.

Feldman said that she couldn't conduct embryonic stem cell research in her lab because of state law and limitations placed on labs that receive federal grants -- the source of much of the money for her research. Her dilemma is one faced by many scientists in the state and is a reason why some have left for such states as California, where the laws on embryonic stem cell research are less restrictive.

For Taubman, backing Feldman's research comes down to helping people.

"I'm not a doctor or a scientist, but I am an optimist who believes in the extraordinary possibilities of modern medicine. This is important work that must continue."

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What is ALS?

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis is a fatal disease better known as Lou Gehrig's disease or ALS. Baseball player Gehrig died of the disease in 1941 at the age of 37.

It's called a neurodegenerative disease because it causes nerve cells to weaken and die.

The disease attacks a specific kind of nerve cell called a motor neuron, the type of cell that connects muscles to the spinal cord and brain and transmits signals that enable us to move.

ALS has its roots in genetic mutations, but many have not yet been discovered. A small minority of ALS cases are inherited by members of families affected by gene mutations. But the vast majority of the approximately 30,000 Americans who have the disease have a spontaneous form that can strike anyone, anywhere.
