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UCI awarded \$27.2 million for new stem cell building

Facility will serve as regional research hub for speeding development of stem cell therapies

BY UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA - IRVINE

UC Irvine was awarded \$27.2 million today from the state to build a new stem cell research facility that will unify and strengthen the campus's fast-growing stem cell biology program and serve as a hub for research in Southern California.

When completed, the three-story, 61,600-square-foot building will house the UCI Sue and Bill Gross Stem Cell Research Center, as many as 26 laboratory-based and clinical researchers, a stem cell techniques course for young scientists, a master's program in biotechnology with an emphasis on stem cell research, and an array of programs and activities that involve and educate patients and the general public.

"The new building will be the center of all stem cell activity on campus," said Peter Donovan, co-director of UCI's stem cell center. "With a central location, our basic, preclinical and clinical researchers can better work together, share ideas, and take potential therapies from the laboratory to the clinic."

In all, the Independent Citizens Oversight Committee, which governs the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, awarded \$271 million in stem cell research infrastructure funding to 12 institutions statewide. This award brings total CIRM funding to UCI to \$46.8 million.

Pending final University of California Board of Regents approval, construction is scheduled to begin in September and finish in July 2010. The facility will be modeled after the existing Hewitt Hall and located within the heart of UCI's Biomedical Research Center in the Health Sciences complex.

The new building will include the core stem cell laboratory and state-of-the-art equipment for human embryonic stem cell line derivation, cell culture, differentiation and purification, and cell and tissue imaging. It also will include clinical space with resources to see patients.

"We expect the building will serve not only UCI, but also our regional partners as well as visitors from around the world," said Hans Keirstead, also co-director of the stem cell center.

UCI's stem cell scientists are pioneers in regeneration, in large-scale production of specialized cells with very high purity, and in methods for using such cells to treat damaged tissues.

The first clinical trial in the United States of a human embryonic stem cell-based therapy likely will be based on work performed in Keirstead's lab at UCI. The therapy will treat people with spinal cord injuries, and the trial will be run by Geron Corp.

UCI plans to recruit six faculty members to expand its stem cell research and regenerative medicine programs. Along with other campus resources and support, this commitment is worth approximately \$17.5 million over the next 10 years.

“I am delighted with the progress our stem cell center directors have made in recruiting and planning for an expanded research program,” said Susan Bryant, vice chancellor for research at UCI and a member of the ICOC. “Our stem cell program is training young UCI scientists, as well as visiting researchers. We have enormous enthusiasm and excitement about the future of stem cell research at UCI.”

In all, the new building will cost approximately \$61 million. CIRM funding will be supplemented with private donations and campus debt funding.

“Stem cell research promises to transform the treatment of disease and to give us longer, healthier lives,” said Edward Thorp, a donor to UCI’s stem cell program. Thorp is a founding faculty member at UCI and a pioneer in the field of quantitative finance.

“We expect donor support will allow continuing breakthroughs by UCI’s stellar research team,” Thorp said.

Said Tom Yuen, chairman and chief executive officer of PrimeCell Therapeutics LLC and SRS Labs, and a UCI stem cell program donor: “In the next decade, stem cell research will improve our quality of life and expand the frontiers of medicine. At UCI, world-class stem cell scientists and innovators are already setting the winning pace.”