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Cornell receives almost $2 million from New York state for stem cell research

Cornell University received two one-year institutional development grants for stem cell research from the state of New York as part of $14.5 million in similar awards granted statewide Jan. 7. A grant to Cornell's Ithaca campus totaled $1 million, while a second award for $997,382 was given to the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City.

These are the first grant awards from New York's new $600 million, multiyear stem cell research program that came out of a stem cell research initiative in the 2007-08 state budget.

"This is a major boost for our stem cell programs and will support individual projects, core facilities and collaborative stem cell research on campus," said Michael Kotlikoff, the Austin O. Hooey Dean of Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine. "The program brings investigators together from several colleges and includes work on stem cell biology and cancer, as well as translational projects using human embryonic stem cell lines in animal models of human disease."

"These are institutional types of grants," said Alexander Nikitin, the principal investigator of the grant and associate professor of pathology in the Department of Biomedical Sciences at the veterinary college. "Cornell University (Ithaca campus) generously provided $250,000 of matching funds, and the total of $1,250,000 will be distributed to different labs performing stem cell research and to the Fluorescence Activated Cell Sorting core facility."

Cornell currently has investigators who conduct research on embryonic and adult stem cells, basic stem cell biology and the use of stem cells to treat cancer, cardiovascular and degenerative disorders. Also, compared to other institutions, Cornell researchers engage in "unparalleled interdisciplinary interactions," and the veterinary college gives Cornell the unique advantage of comparing stem cells across species, as researchers here study mouse, dog, horse and human stem cells, said Nikitin.

He said investigators on the Ithaca campus from the Departments of Molecular Biology and Genetics, Biomedical Engineering, Biomedical Sciences, Clinical Sciences and the James A. Baker Institute for Animal Health will receive the funding. The money will be divided approximately 50 percent for research, 20 percent for training new investigators in stem cell science and 30 percent for acquiring new instruments for conducting research. Some funds also will go toward establishing a Cornell stem cell program that will offer workshops and will invite national and international experts to Cornell to give seminars and training, Nikitin said.

At the Weill Cornell Medical College's Ansary Stem Cell Center for Regenerative Medicine, the state grant will allow scientists and students to examine the possible uses of both adult stem cells and embryonic stem cells.

"There are many scientific benefits from the use of stem cells for the study of human disease," said Dr. Shahin Rafii, the Arthur Belfer Professor of Genetic Medicine, director of the Ansary Stem Cell Center for Regenerative Medicine and a noted Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator. "These cells have the potential to lead to the discovery of future treatments for diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease, heart disease and cancer, among many others."

Overall, 25 institutions in New York received one-year grants for stem cell research and training in the first round. The state awarded $6.1 million for direct stem cell research, $7.4 million for stem cell research infrastructure and $1 million for stem cell research training. All not-for-profit research institutions in New York that received at least $1 million in biomedical funding in 2006 from the National Institutes of Health or the National Science Foundation were eligible to apply for between $100,000 and $1 million in state funding.

By Krishna Ramanujan