Gov. Rell, Hogan, Williams announce Connecticut's first two Human Embryonic Stem Cell Lines created for research use

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HARTFORD, CT – University of Connecticut President Michael J. Hogan, joined by Governor M. Jodi Rell, Senate President Donald Williams, Speaker of the House Christopher Donovan and other members of the General Assembly, today announced that UConn researchers have created two new human embryonic stem cell lines and are making the lines available to academic researchers to study the therapeutic potential of the cells.

The two new lines signify a milestone in the state's pioneering stem cell program approved by the Connecticut General Assembly and signed by Gov. Rell in 2005, committing $100 million to fund stem cell research and training programs for 10 years.

The ability to provide hESC lines is essential for investigators working at the frontier of stem cell research to make discoveries that can be translated into new treatments and cures for millions of people annually who are stricken with debilitating chronic diseases.

Passage of the Stem Cell Investment Act positioned Connecticut as the third state in the nation, behind only California and New Jersey, to provide public funding in support of embryonic and human adult stem cell research. It established a competitive process for awarding state stem cell research grants and created the publicly appointed Stem Cell Research Advisory Committee (SCRAC), chaired by the Connecticut Commissioner of Public Health, to review applications for the state funds and distribute available dollars.

Funding from the first round of state funds awarded in April 2007, was used to establish a $2.5 million Human Embryonic Stem Cell (hESC) Core laboratory led by Dr. Ren-He Xu at the UConn Health Center where the two new stem cell lines – identified as CT1 and CT2 – were developed by Dr. Ge Lin and coworkers in the Xu lab. UConn now joins an elite group of universities – including University of Wisconsin Madison, Harvard University, and University of California San Francisco – that have created human embryonic stem cell lines.

"Three years ago, when we committed $100 million over 10 years as part of our Stem Cell Investment Act, there were some who asked 'Is it worth it?'" said Governor Rell. "We are here today because the world-class researchers and scientists in Connecticut are answering that question with a resounding "Absolutely!" This news that UConn researchers created two new stem cell lines comes just 18 months after receiving funding. This puts UConn in a very elite group of universities. So yes, we are getting great returns on that investment, and we know the possibilities for health care therapies from this cutting-edge research are limitless."

Since launching the state's stem cell program, SCRAC has allocated a total of $29.62 million in two rounds of funding that is supporting some 70 research labs and cores at UConn and its Health Center, Yale and Wesleyan. The state stem cell grants have assisted in building an infrastructure of core facilities, initiated new research projects, enabled the recruitment of new faculty, and stimulated new collaborations among leading scientists at Connecticut universities and biotech industries throughout the state.

The UConn Stem Cell Core facility serves as a storage, distribution, and training center for hESCs, and is developing new hESC lines and new hESC technology for researchers statewide. In addition, it provides nine other stem cell lines to over 30 laboratories at UConn, Yale and Wesleyan; has trained more than 100 researchers and graduate students in stem cell culture statewide; and provides technical support to support research and training for scientists throughout Connecticut.

An exciting aspect of the state's funding program, says UConn President Michael Hogan, is that it has drawn into the field a broad spectrum of research scientists who traditionally have not conducted research with hES cells, in part due to the federal funding restrictions. Federal funding for research on human embryonic stem cells to date has been limited to those lines created before August 9, 2001. But federal regulations do not restrict research on stem cell lines created using state or private funds.

"The state of Connecticut has been very smart in its grant-making strategy," says Hogan. "The grants issued so far have allowed universities to lay the groundwork for preparing a generation of stem cell scientists."

This spring the SCRAC is scheduled to disburse funds in the third round of competitive grants. "This next round of funding," predicts Hogan, "will drive the capacity for the research into human embryonic stem cells to a new level."

"Connecticut has emerged as a national leader in stem cell research and it didn't happen by accident," said Senator Williams. "Three years ago we passed legislation that set the course for where we are now. The investment will continue to pay dividends, especially for Connecticut's economy, and it is critical that we make its survival one of our highest priorities as balance the budget. I look forward to working with Gov. Rell and my colleagues in the legislature to keep Connecticut's stem cell industry thriving."

"The state's investment in stem cell research is a commitment we can all be proud of," said Speaker of the House Christopher G. Donovan. "The dollars made available since 2005 have enabled scientists from the University of Connecticut and other research centers in the state to become leaders in the field. The infrastructure, facilities, research studies, and collaborations this funding has made possible continue to yield new discoveries and attract innovative industries and academic talent to our state."

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About the UConn Stem Cell Core Lab: http://genetics.uchc.edu/stemcell/index.htm