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Maryland, California team up on stem cells

Research collaboration signed at international conference in Baltimore

by Kevin James Shay | Staff Writer

Two states on the cutting edge of stem cell research are partnering to develop what Gov. Martin O'Malley on Monday called "some of the greatest potential in humanity's salvation arsenal."

O'Malley (D) was speaking at the 2009 World Stem Cell Summit in Baltimore, where officials from the Maryland Technology Development Corp., which administers the state's stem cell funding program, and the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, that state's stem cell agency, signed the collaboration agreement.

The two states are among those with the nation's most promising stem cell programs, said Dan Gincel, director of the Maryland stem cell fund, in a statement. "We believe that this agreement will facilitate advancements of technology for our researchers, stakeholders and the people that can benefit from stem cell technology," he said.

Tedco has a dozen collaborative agreements with federal laboratories, including the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. It also has an investment program with the Johnson & Johnson Corporate Office of Science & Technology.

The California institute has similar agreements with six nations, including Canada, Japan and the U.K. Its pact with Maryland, however, is its first with another state.

The agreement will make it easier for researchers in California and Maryland not to just collaborate, but to obtain joint funding, officials said. Besides working with other states, Maryland is reinvigorating its efforts with federal partners, O'Malley said.

"We are readjusting our own stem cell projects here in Maryland so that we complement the federal initiatives that are currently under way, rather than duplicating them," said O'Malley, who accepted an award at the conference for his leadership.

Also Monday, executives with Rockville biotech Neuralstem said that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved its new drug application to start a phase 1 trial to treat amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, with its spinal cord stem cell treatment.

The California institute was formed in 2005 after a ballot measure established a \$3 billion stem cell research fund for universities and researchers. The institute has approved 307 research grants worth about \$781 million so far.

Tedco was established by the Maryland General Assembly in 1998 as an independent business development entity. The Maryland Stem Cell Research Commission was formed as a Tedco unit in

2006. About \$56 million has been invested in research since 2007, almost exclusively to university researchers, making Maryland home to one of the largest stem cell funds in the nation.

Maryland is home to about a half-dozen companies in the stem cell industry, with about half pursuing treatments and the others providing services to stem cell researchers.

The conference ran through Wednesday, and organizers expected more than 1,200 scientists, researchers and others to attend.

Presented by the Genetics Policy Institute, the conference was hosted by Tedco, Johns Hopkins University, the University System of Maryland, the Maryland Department of Business and Economic Development and the Maryland Stem Cell Research Fund.