

CALIFORNIA

More stem cell research grants are on the way

Carl T. Hall, Chronicle Science Writer
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California stem cell scientists got a fresh infusion of \$76 million in research grants Friday as the state Proposition 71 program gained momentum.

A new round of grants was announced in Los Angeles by leaders of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, whose governing board was meeting at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

"This will move us forward on many fronts," said Zach Hall, the institute's president and chief scientific officer.

The grants provide some of California's leading biologists guaranteed four-year financing for some of the most ambitious stem cell projects yet devised. Projects had to focus specifically on human embryonic stem cells ineligible for federal grants.

With \$45 million in grants announced a month ago, the California institute now ranks as the biggest stem cell money source in the United States and among the biggest in the world. An additional \$48 million in grants for lab facilities is expected in June.

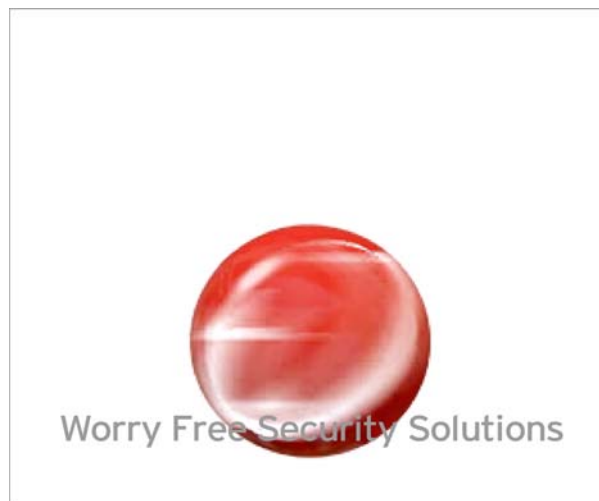
The winning grant projects involve such goals as learning how stem cells divide and differentiate into particular cell types, finding novel methods of producing stem cell lines, perfecting new laboratory methods of handling the cells, and learning how diseases develop by watching them in stem cell colonies.

Twelve institutions, all nonprofits or part of the UC system, shared 29 large "comprehensive" grants worth \$74.6 million. Two other smaller grants, totaling \$1.1 million, were added to a previous list announced last month.

Scientists at UCSF and its affiliated J. David Gladstone Institutes, followed closely by Stanford University researchers, topped the comprehensive grant totals, receiving seven grants worth about \$18 million. Dr. Deepak Srivastava at the Gladstone Institute received the biggest single grant, \$3.1 million, for a project to unravel how molecules known as microRNAs help guide the development of stem cells into heart muscle cells.

Stanford got seven grants, for \$17.7 million, including a \$2.4 million grant to a UCSF researcher, Renee Reijo Pera, who recently announced a move to Stanford to pursue a cloning technique known as somatic cell nuclear transfer. That grant and a smaller cloning-related award to Stanford in February mark the first substantial public financing for nuclear transfer in the country.

State voters created the Prop. 71 program in 2004 with a plan to distribute \$3 billion in bond-financed



research money. The first research grants were announced in February after the release of training grants last year.

All the grants are being underwritten from donated funds while the institute battles lawsuits that prevent it from issuing taxpayer-backed bonds. A state Supreme Court review is possible sometime this year.

Dr. Michael Longaker, deputy director of a regenerative medicine institute at Stanford, said scientists are expecting the courts to clear the way soon for even bigger grant announcements.

"We're excited about this, but we're also excited about what's coming," he said. "This is the beginning of what I think is an unprecedented time, a bold and unprecedented move by a state to do a big science project."

The federal National Institutes of Health is the traditional financier of biomedical research, but the Bush administration has restricted NIH funds for research that involves human cells derived from embryos. The California program was designed to take the place of the NIH in that area and has spurred similar efforts in other states.

Stem cells can transform into all other cell types during development. Because of that flexibility, they are touted as a unique research tool and potential font of replacement parts for diseases such as diabetes and Parkinson's. But critics maintain that it's immoral to destroy human embryos, as is typically done to derive a stem cell colony.

David Llewellyn, a Sacramento lawyer helping to push the anti-Prop. 71 litigation toward a possible Supreme Court decision, characterized the research grants announced Friday as "a waste of money," saying the embryonic cells have less proven medical value than so-called adult stem cells obtained from less ethically controversial sources.

Meanwhile, research advocates across the country hailed Friday's announcement but said it highlighted the need for a change in federal policy.

"The patient advocates want the research to go forward in every state, so it's a good thing it's finally starting to move forward in California," said Eve Herold, director of public policy research and education at the Genetics Policy Institute, a think tank in Burke, Va. "But ultimately we're going to need a coherent federal policy to make the research money available to people in any state."

A full list of the grants announced Friday can be found at www.cirm.ca.gov.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/17/BAG0GON6M11.DTL>

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