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THREE UCLA STEM CELL SCIENTISTS RECEIVE NEW FACULTY AWARDS FROM THE CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE FOR REGENERATIVE MEDICINE

Three UCLA scientists today received grants totaling \$7.5 million from the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) to conduct leading-edge research that may help shed light on the developmental and molecular biology of stem cells.

The scientists, part of the Eli and Edythe Broad Center of Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research, were among 22 researchers from throughout the state chosen to receive New Faculty Awards, designed to encourage and foster the next generation of stem cell researchers.

UCLA award winners include Dr. Siavash Kurdistani, an assistant professor of biological chemistry, Dr. Hanna Mikkola, an assistant professor of molecular, cellular and developmental biology, and Kathrin Plath, an assistant professor of biological chemistry.

Dr. Owen Witte, renowned scientist and director of the Broad stem cell research center, said he was pleased that three UCLA researchers received grants.

“These grants are given to promising scientists in the critical, early stages of their careers as independent investigators and faculty members, and I’m proud to have three UCLA scientists among these deserving winners,” Witte said.

In all, more than \$54 million was awarded by CIRM to provide salary and research support to young scientists for up to five years. The funding, according to CIRM Interim President Richard Murphy, will allow researchers to create a stable environment “to build innovative and robust stem cell research programs in the state of California.”

The grants are particularly important, Murphy said, because they provide money to investigators in the early phases of their careers, when funding typically is challenging to secure, and at a time when funding sources for stem cell research are limited.

Kurdistani’s \$3 million grant will fund studies of epigenetic modifications in normal cells, human embryonic stem cells and human tumors. Kurdistani hopes to identify new regulators of these epigenetic modifications, probe chromatin alterations that mimic cancer and correlate epigenetic patterns in epithelial cancers with clinical outcomes.

Mikkola’s \$2.3 million grant will fund studies to understand the molecular processes that contribute to blood stem cell specification, to better define the cell of origin of the blood stem cell in mice and humans and characterize the molecular changes that distinguish self-renewing blood stem cells.

Plath's \$2.2 million grant will fund research to understand the molecular mechanisms underlying somatic cell reprogramming to an embryonic state in mice, to improve reprogramming protocols, to apply this knowledge to the reprogramming of human somatic cells and examine molecular targets and changes during the reprogramming process.

The grants were awarded at a meeting of CIRM's governing body, the Independent Citizens Oversight Committee. CIRM received 59 letters of intent from 29 institutions across the state. CIRM was established in early 2005 after the passage of Proposition 71, which provided \$3 billion in stem cell research funding.

UCLA stem cell center scientists have successfully competed for CIRM grants. The center received the largest training grant awarded by the state, \$3.75 million, to train the next generation of stem cell researchers, and UCLA scientists were awarded nine seed and comprehensive grants totaling more than \$9 million. In June, the stem cell center was awarded a \$2.8 million grant from the state to construct lab space dedicated to the creation of new human embryonic stem cell lines and continued research on existing stem cell lines.

UCLA's stem cell center was launched in 2005 with a \$20 million commitment over five years from UCLA. Since that time, institute officials have recruited some of the country's top stem cell scientists to fill six of 12 new faculty positions. The new faculty members – from renowned institutions such as Harvard, MIT and Johns Hopkins – were drawn to UCLA because of the highly collaborative research environment and the state's stem cell research-friendly atmosphere, Witte said.

In September 2007, in recognition of a \$20 million gift, the UCLA stem cell center was renamed the Eli and Edythe Broad Center of Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research at UCLA. The center is a collaboration of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, UCLA Henry Samueli School of Engineering and Applied Science, and the UCLA College. It also involves close collaborations with the UCLA schools of law, nursing, dentistry and public affairs, UCLA AIDS Institute, UCLA Center for Society and Genetics, Brian Research Institute and the California Nanosystems Institute.

The center is committed to a multi-disciplinary, integrated collaboration of scientific, academic and medical disciplines for the purpose of understanding adult and human embryonic stem cells. The center supports innovation, excellence and the highest ethical standards focused on stem cell research with the intent of facilitating basic scientific inquiry directed towards future clinical applications to treat disease. For more information, visit www.stemcell.ucla.edu.

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