National Stem Cell Centre

MEDIA RELEASE

Stem Cell Centre signs up for a new era in Australian biotechnology

11 June 2003

The National Stem Cell Centre (NSCC) has this week commenced independent operations following the signing of a Deed of Agreement with the Commonwealth Government to formally establish Australia's first Biotechnology Centre of Excellence.

Under the agreement, the Commonwealth Government's Innovation Statement *Backing Australia's Ability* will provide $43.55 million to the National Stem Cell Centre over the next three years to undertake collaborative R&D in biotechnology, primarily aimed at the development of therapies based on human stem cells and associated technologies for tissue repair. The NSCC is a key element of the Government's National Biotechnology Strategy.

For the past year, the centre has been generously provided with bridging finance by Monash University.

The centre, which has its headquarters in Melbourne and nodes in Adelaide, Brisbane, and Sydney, will work together with life scientists around Australia to advance research based on adult and embryonic stem cells, tissue matrices and transplantation biology. It will develop new therapies with the potential to treat disorders, diseases and injuries that currently cannot be cured by today's medical technology.

Supplementary funds of $11.3M from the Victorian Government's Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) initiative and a further $5.5M from the Commonwealth's Major National Research Facilities (MNRF) program will bring the NSCC's three-year budget to over $60 million, although in kind support from the participating institutions will almost double this figure in real terms.

The NSCC's chief executive officer, Prof. Alan Trounson, said that the agreement will allow Australia to take a leading international role in biotechnology based on stem cells for cell therapies and tissue repair.

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“Stem cell therapies have the potential to revolutionise medicine and treat some of our most intractable and debilitating conditions, such as Parkinson’s disease, heart failure and diabetes. However, to realise this potential to remove the scientific roadblocks and develop products that will actually save lives, we need a critical mass of world-class research activity and a clear focus on commercialising our research”.

“This centre, which will operate with a staff of up to about 140, including about 60 scientists, will contain sufficient critical mass to attract the best researchers in the world. It is also structured to go beyond good science to develop the medicines and therapies that patients need and to capture the commercial benefits of new intellectual property created in the research programs. Postgraduate research students will also be a key element of the centre’s research activities,” he said.

Prof Trounson said the NSCC would initially focus on several key scientific issues—for example, the functional integration of the cellular matrix to repair the patient’s own damaged tissues, direction of stem cells into mature functioning tissues and combating the body’s immune response to the introduced cells.

He felt that treatments to repair wounds and pelvic floor injuries would be among the first medical applications arising from the NSCC. Later work would focus on potential applications of adult and embryonic stem cells, of which the latter appear to be uniquely able to readily form any of the body’s 200 different tissues.

Prof. Trounson thanked the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments for their funding support and said he looked forward to working closely with the NSCC’s initial participating partners in the universities and institutions of Queensland, NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

The NSCC’s chief operating officer, Dr Dianna DeVore said the agreement with the Commonwealth recognised the need for the centre to operate on a business footing to create and commercially exploit intellectual property arising from stem-cell research.

“This is not a research institute in the usual sense. The centre will be aiming to integrate different scientific platforms in a way that sets us apart from other institutions and companies working in this field. Our aim is to develop therapies, not just do interesting science, although there will be plenty of that as well,” she said.

Dr DeVore said the centre would operate in some respects like the cooperative research centres (CRCs)—which typically have strong links to industry and academia—but significantly this centre also has an independent board and a commercial arm.

“Australia is one of the biggest players in stem cell research, but it promises to be a highly competitive field, so we need to position ourselves commercially if we are to succeed in returning major economic benefit to Australia,” she said.

Participating organisations in the National Stem Cell Centre presently include University of Adelaide, Monash University, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, Howard Florey Institute of Experimental Physiology and Medicine, Peter MacCallum Cancer Institute and Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute.

Commonwealth funding for the NSCC is administered through the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, the Australian Research Council and the Department of Education, Science and Training.

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