

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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\$2 MILLION FROM NIH SUPPORTS PEDIATRIC LUPUS STUDIES AT UT SOUTHWESTERN

DALLAS – Dec. 4, 2000 – A \$2 million grant from the National Institutes of Health will allow UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas researchers to investigate how certain blood cells affect the course of lupus in children.

Dr. Virginia Pascual, assistant professor of pediatrics and head of pediatric rheumatology at UT Southwestern, and her colleagues hope to identify common molecular markers in diseases caused by lupus. They will focus on B lymphocytes (a type of white blood cell) and gene patterns.

“We are very excited with the opportunity we have to study in-depth our pediatric lupus population,” said Pascual, also an assistant investigator at the Baylor Institute for Immunology Research, a collaboration between UT Southwestern, Children’s Medical Center of Dallas, Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children and Baylor University Medical Center. “We are hopeful this will allow us to better understand the disease and treat our patients.”

Lupus is a chronic, sometimes fatal, autoimmune disease in which the immune system, for unknown reasons, becomes hyperactive and attacks normal tissue. Pascual is specifically concerned with one of the three basic types of lupus, systemic lupus erythematosus. Known as SLE, it attacks multiple vital systems in the body, including the skin, joints, lungs, blood cells, blood vessels, heart, kidneys and nervous system.

Because the course of the disease is unpredictable, there is no current means to predict who will develop life-threatening complications. Pascual hopes to locate a common marker, or cell characteristic, that would make such a determination possible. She and her colleagues believe some important answers lie in the B cells.

Preliminary studies have shown that B cells in children with SLE differ from those of healthy children and adults. Pascual hypothesizes that intrinsic B-cell defects cause the altered blood phenotype found in SLE patients.

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She and her colleagues are studying about 70 pediatric lupus patients at Scottish Rite Hospital and Children's Medical Center. If they find the molecular markers they expect, the researchers will then check those markers against clinical findings to see if they can be used to predict disease activity.

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