

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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NIH AWARDS \$5 MILLION TO UT SOUTHWESTERN FOR STUDY OF GENES AFFECTING IMMUNE SYSTEM

DALLAS – Nov. 8, 2000 - The National Institutes of Health awarded researchers at UT Southwestern Medical Center a \$5 million, five-year grant to continue their studies of the genetic basis for susceptibility to systemic autoimmunity.

The researchers, led by Dr. Ward Wakeland, director of UT Southwestern's Center for Immunology, recently identified a cluster of genes responsible for disrupting the normal functioning of the immune system in a manner that leads to systemic autoimmunity in mice.

Wakeland's team is using a mouse model of systemic autoimmunity to dissect and characterize the manner in which individual genes contribute to disease development.

"We are very pleased to receive this grant from the NIH," Wakeland said. "These funds will support the initiation of a major new thrust toward identifying a key cluster of genes that appear to be responsible for initiating systemic autoimmunity.

"A long-term goal of our study is to identify genetic targets for the development of drug therapies for human patients with systemic autoimmunity. Current treatment for systemic autoimmunity is with broad-spectrum-immunosuppressive drugs, which have a variety of harmful side effects."

The team of researchers is collaborating with a group of human genome investigators to determine whether these same genes contribute to systemic autoimmunity in humans.

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Systemic autoimmune diseases include systemic lupus erythematosus and rheumatoid arthritis.

"We are currently focused on identifying genetic pathways that specifically influence the development of autoimmunity, with the hope that eventually it will be possible to develop strategies to suppress these pathways without affecting normal immune system functions," Wakeland said.

Wakeland, and his human genome colleagues presented their findings at the American College of Rheumatology conference in Philadelphia at the end of October.

Investigators include Dr. Chandra Mohan, assistant professor of internal medicine in the Division of Rheumatology and the Simmons Arthritis Center at UT Southwestern. Rheumatology researchers from the University of Florida, Drs. Eric Sobel and Laurence Morel, are also part of the team.

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