UT News
Office of Medical Information
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January 16, 1987

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*****Harold C. Simmons donates $2 million to house arthritis research center

DALLAS -- Dallas financier Harold C. Simmons has given The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas $2 million to build new laboratories for the arthritis research center he initiated three years ago.

In 1982 Simmons pledged $8 million over 10 years to support basic research into the causes of inflammatory arthritis, particularly the types affecting the spine -- spondyloarthropathies. It was the largest single gift the health science center had received.

Now a multifaceted research effort is underway that involves 40 faculty members, postdoctoral fellows, technicians and clerical staff, twice the original number of people in the rheumatology division of the school. "It's hard to work with as many as eight people sharing a lab," says Dr. Peter Lipsky, director of the Harold C. Simmons Arthritis Research Center. "It is also becoming difficult to recruit additional investigators under those conditions."

That problem will soon be solved by Simmons' $2-million gift to house the research center in 10,000 square feet of new laboratory space by summer. The laboratories will share the eighth floor of the Cecil H. and Ida Green Biomedical Research Building with a diabetes research center.

"It is appropriate that we be located near the diabetes research because the two diseases appear to have a fundamental pattern in common -- a genetic link, an environmental 'trigger' and an autoimmune reaction that turns the body's normal defense mechanisms against itself," says Lipsky.

The pattern applies to several diseases. In rheumatoid arthritis, the inflammation occurs in the joints of the extremities. In diabetes, the autoimmune response kills cells in the pancreas that produce insulin. In multiple sclerosis, inflammation attacks the central nervous system.

In the spondyloarthropathies, which include ankylosing spondylitis, Reiter's syndrome, psoriatic arthritis, enteropathic arthritis and reactive arthritis, the body's reaction is inflammation of the spine, hip or shoulder joints. The family of diseases affects more than 2 million Americans, including Simmons and some of his relatives.

Since the underlying cause of these diseases is unknown, there is no effective way to treat or cure them. The development of effective therapeutic approaches depends on understanding the cause.

"In each instance, the pattern seems to be the same although the particular genetic element, the trigger and the response are different," says Lipsky. A breakthrough in research on one disease could advance research on all of them. "We believe that we have a very good chance of proving the hypothesis because we have an excellect disease model to work with."

Reactive arthritis is a sudden inflammation of the spinal joints that may occur approximately 30 days after dysentery caused by certain bacteria, including salmonella

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and shigella. The intriguing thing, says Lipsky, is that 80 to 90 percent of the people who develop reactive arthritis after such infections have a common genetic marker -- the HLA-B27 antigen.

Lipsky's team is using immunology, cell biology, genetics and molecular biology to probe the links in the disease chain -- the genetic protein, the bacteria and the immune response. They are using all the tools that high-tech science at UTHSCD has to offer, including DNA sequencing, cloning, electron microscopy, X-ray crystallography, and the development of transgenic arthritis-prone rats.

"In the long run, what's going to happen is we're going to have to figure this out from the beginning," Lipsky says. "And the possibility is better today than ever before. This is the most exciting time to be in medical research."

Simmons said, "I hope there may be progress toward understanding the functions of this disease in man. I think basic research will enlarge the scope of knowledge." If it leads to a way to intervene in the disease's progression or to an effective treatment during Simmons' lifetime, so much the better, says Lipsky.

Simmons is a U.T. Austin graduate who received both his bachelor's and master's degrees in economics. After working for the U.S. government four years as a civil service investigator and F.D.I.C. bank examiner, Simmons spent the next four years becoming a loan officer at the Republic National Bank in Dallas.

In 1961, eight years after graduation, Simmons became an entrepreneur and financier and never looked back. He used financial leverage to develop a chain of 100 drug stores, which he sold to Jack Eckerd Corporation in 1973.

Simmons founded Contran in 1968. The company became a publicly traded corporation in 1969. Simmons gradually increased his holdings in Contran, devoting all his time to it after 1973. Today Contran is wholly owned by the Harold C. Simmons 1964 Family Trust. Contran is a multi-billion-dollar holding company with investments in nearly sixty corporations producing sugar, timber products, chemicals and steel and owning land, retail stores and aircraft servicing firms.

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Note: The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and the School of Allied Health Sciences.

For more information about Mr. Simmons, please contact Largent Parks, the Contran Corporation, 214/450-4217.

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