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UT Southwestern student receives fellowship from Howard Hughes Medical Institute

DALLAS – March 31, 2010 – Mariam El-Ashmawy, a student enrolled in UT Southwestern Medical Center's prestigious Medical Scientist Training Program, has been awarded a 2010 Gilliam Fellowship for Advanced Study from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI).

Ms. El-Ashmawy, a Lewisville native, is one of five Gilliam fellows and the only M.D./Ph.D. student selected this year from institutions across the country. Each fellow receives \$44,000 annually for up to five years to support his or her studies toward a doctoral degree in science. To date, 30 individuals have received the fellowship.

According to HHMI, the Gilliam fellows program aims to enrich science research and increase the diversity of college and university faculty members. Fellows, who come from groups underrepresented in the sciences or from disadvantaged backgrounds, have worked in the labs of top HHMI scientists as undergraduates.

A 2008 graduate of Arizona State University, Ms. El-Ashmawy entered UT Southwestern's Medical Scientist Training Program in 2009. Students enrolled in the highly integrative program receive both hands-on clinical experience and laboratory research training. Upon completing the program, students earn an M.D. from UT Southwestern Medical School and a Ph.D. from UT Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.

Ms. El-Ashmawy said she plans to concentrate her studies on neuroscience. Last summer, she worked with Dr. Lisa Monteggia, associate professor of psychiatry, and next summer she hopes to work with Dr. Luis Parada, chairman of developmental biology.

"I chose UT Southwestern because it has a great M.D./Ph.D. program with a strong emphasis on science, and I felt at home here," Ms. El-Ashmawy said. "The caliber of medical training combined with bench-side research at UT Southwestern is hard to beat."

When she was a middle-school student, Ms. El-Ashmawy's father survived a heart attack. At the hospital, she viewed images of the blood vessels in her father's chest. That experience inspired her to think about a career in medicine.

"The doctor showed us where the blockage was, and I wanted to know why and how it

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happened,” she recalled. “It was a turning point for me to want to understand the human body.”

As an undergraduate, Ms. El-Ashmawy, whose parents emigrated from Egypt to the U.S., participated in the National Institutes of Health-sponsored Minority Access to Research Careers program. The experience provided opportunities to perform research and spurred her interest in laboratory science. It also gave her a chance to reach out to the community. She organized her fellow undergraduates to talk with high school students about scientific careers. Both those activities have informed her views on the importance of diversity in science and medicine, she said.

“When you have a lot of different perspectives focused on the same problem, you’re going to get a better solution,” Ms. El-Ashmawy said. “This process is enhanced if the people involved have a wider perspective because their race, culture or gender has provided different life experiences.”

One of the nation’s largest philanthropies, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute plays a key role in advancing biomedical research and science education in the U.S. The institute spent \$730 million for research and distributed \$101 million in grant support for science education in fiscal year 2009. HHMI established the Gilliam fellowships in 2004 in honor of the late James H. Gilliam Jr., a charter trustee of the institute who spent his life nurturing excellence and diversity in education and science.

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