

News

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**** UT Southwestern receives blindness
prevention research grant

Research to Prevent Blindness has awarded a \$45,000 grant to The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. The organization awards annual grants to 61 medical schools and is the world's leading voluntary organization in support of eye research.

In announcing UT Southwestern's latest grant, RPB Chairman Lew R. Wasserman said: "Blindness and eye diseases are the third leading cause of disability in the United States and cost this nation \$16 billion annually. Eye research can reduce this enormous human and monetary toll and merits the concern and active support of every responsible American."

Previous RPB grants to UT Southwestern total more than \$226,000.

James McCulley, M.D., the David Bruton Jr. professor and chairman of ophthalmology at the medical center, said the grants are particularly important because federal funding isn't adequate to meet all research needs. "This grant is for unspecified use, which provides us with the flexibility to explore promising new research areas that might yield a better understanding of the maladies that affect the eye," Dr. McCulley explained.

One of the major research areas for UT Southwestern ophthalmologists is immunology. Two new researchers joined the

(More)

UT Southwestern receives grand from RPB - 2

department this past year, reinforcing an already-strong immunology research team.

Research into the immunology of corneal transplantation will remain a major focus, McCulley said. During the past year, researchers in the department demonstrated that the presence of star-shaped cells, called Langerhans cells, in the central areas of the cornea triggered graft rejection. These cells, typically found in the deeper layers of the skin and occasionally in the corneal epithelium, are believed to be involved in certain immune responses.

Research at UT Southwestern has shown that destroying these cells using ultraviolet radiation lessens the likelihood of rejection. This finding is significant not only in the field of corneal transplantation but also for other forms of organ transplantation..

McCulley anticipates doing more corneal transplants now that a new facility for specialty surgery is open at Zale Lipshy University Hospital at Southwestern Medical Center, the 160-bed teaching, research and referral hospital affiliated with the medical center.

"We've managed to develop corneal transplantation and ocular immunology into strengths at UT Southwestern, and we will continue to develop other areas with the help of RPB," McCulley said.

Dr. McCulley is currently heading a national multi-center trial for Bausch & Lomb to test the efficacy of his therapy for acanthamoeba keratitis, a rare but serious amoebic infection that can cause blindness. The infection most commonly results from contact lens

(More)

UT Southwestern receives grand from RPB - 3

wearers' rinsing their contacts with tap water or using homemade saline solutions. The ophthalmologist is concerned that the growing number of patients he sees with the condition indicates that either people are being careless in cleaning their contact lenses or they aren't receiving proper instruction on lens care from contact lens providers.

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