

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

Media Contact: Toni Heinzl
214-648-3404
toni.heinzl@utsouthwestern.edu

Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center aims to join nation's elite

DALLAS – Nov. 2, 2005 – Designation by the National Cancer Institute as a “Comprehensive Cancer Center” is the gold standard that defines broad excellence in oncology. Currently, there are 39 such centers in the United States.

Dr. James Willson, director of the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center at UT Southwestern Medical Center, wants the 40th to be here.

His ambitious plan to enable the Simmons Center to receive this elite distinction has been enthusiastically supported by Harold C. Simmons and his wife, Annette, whose most recent gift of \$50 million to UT Southwestern will provide Dr. Willson and his colleagues with the resources to succeed.

He has already accomplished that feat once as the former leader of the NCI-designated Case Comprehensive Cancer Center in Cleveland.

Dr. Willson joined UT Southwestern in September 2004. His recruitment was made possible by a \$15.4 million gift from Harold C. Simmons and his family. Since his arrival, Dr. Willson has been working to fulfill the mission of boosting UT Southwestern's cancer program into one of national prominence.

Dr. Willson's five-year plan for the cancer center addresses four major areas:

- To recruit 30 cancer specialists and assemble multidisciplinary teams for each major cancer – breast, head and neck, lung, gastrointestinal (pancreas, stomach and colon), genitourinary (prostate, bladder and kidney), blood (lymphoma, leukemia and myeloma), brain and gynecologic. Each team will include surgeons, medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, pathologists and research scientists who will offer patients coming to the Simmons Cancer Center the benefit of the cumulative expertise of highly trained specialists and state-of-the-art technologies, all delivered in a seamless, integrated environment.
- To implement specialized oncology services to assist patients with access to and navigation of their individual cancer treatment programs and to provide expert supportive and palliative care for patients and their families. A nurse oncology leader will be recruited to coordinate oncology nursing education and build uniform excellence in nursing excellence across the medical center. A clinical psychologist and specially trained

(MORE)

Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center – 2

oncology nurse practitioners also will be recruited.

- To establish a strong clinical research infrastructure. Clinical trials offer cancer patients access to tomorrow's cure today, and Dr. Willson is prioritizing the need to initiate more clinical trials and translate new scientific discoveries to patients. What's needed, he said, is a clinical trials unit where patients are treated and monitored, a research pharmacy, a clinical pharmacology laboratory and biostatistics experts.
- To change the paradigm of cancer care to one that emphasizes prevention. Prevention research will be directed at healthy populations – including those at high risk – and cancer survivors. Dr. Willson plans to initiate programs in cancer prevention using new chemoprevention agents and genetic studies to identify high-risk individuals and discovering more effective methods to promote healthy behaviors.

Dr. Willson, holder of the Lisa K. Simmons Distinguished Chair in Comprehensive Oncology, said the success of his plans will be measured in numbers: cancer patient referrals to UT Southwestern, enrollment of UT Southwestern cancer patients in clinical trials and increased funding from the National Cancer Institute.

"UT Southwestern's long-standing strengths are in the scientific discovery area," Dr. Willson said. "Our next steps are to apply this scientific discovery engine to advance the treatment and prevention of cancer and provide exemplary care for cancer patients from North Texas and other regions."

The prestige of the NCI designation and the additional \$4.5 million per year in federal research grants it brings are great rewards, but Dr. Willson insists they are not the primary goals that drive him.

"My work has been all about the excitement of cancer research and the opportunity to link research and patient care," he said.

Dr. Willson graduated from the University of Alabama School of Medicine and completed additional training at the NCI and Johns Hopkins Hospital. World-renowned as a leader in colon and rectal cancer, his own research has led to the development of cell and animal models for human colon cancer that have been the key to identifying genetic factors in disease progression. His most recent research focuses on identification of novel molecular targets for cancer therapy.

Steady progress in cancer research at UT Southwestern is evident by the expansion of research and clinical facilities on the medical center's North Campus. More than 60,000 square feet of laboratory and office space in the Simmons Biomedical Research Building, the Seay Biomedical Building, and the new Biomedical Research Tower are meant to inspire a multidisciplinary synergy between researchers and clinicians in the various subspecialties of oncology.

(MORE)

Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center – 3

“What I hope is that we build on the success and reputation of our nationally recognized lung-cancer program under the leadership of Dr. John Minna [director of the Nancy B. and Jake L. Hamon Center for Therapeutic Oncology Research and the W.A. “Tex” and Deborah Moncrief Jr. Center for Cancer Genetics] and use it as a model for other areas of cancer research,” Dr. Willson said. “Cancer centers are programs that network and bring together complementary experts and resources. The idea is to create a whole that is greater than the sum of the individual parts. The end point is to build cancer research that could not exist without a comprehensive cancer center, and this is done by linking together activities within the excellence of the already existing departments.”

Since arriving at UT Southwestern, Dr. Willson has increased the strength of the cancer team, recruiting key researchers in pharmacology, neuro-oncology and other specialties, to join ranks with the programs already nationally recognized at UT Southwestern.

Dr. Hak Choy, chairman of radiation oncology, was recruited along with Dr. Robert Timmerman, vice chairman of the department, to build an outstanding program that offers treatments with the latest advanced radiation therapy equipment, including a gamma knife for brain radiosurgery and an image-guided radiation system for lung and prostate cancer treatment. Both Dr. Choy and Dr. Timmerman have pioneered ways to minimize side effects of radiation treatment while improving cure rates.

Bone marrow transplants at the Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center are performed under the direction of Dr. Robert Collins, director of the UT Southwestern Hematopoietic Cell Transplant Program, which has grown rapidly to become a major clinical enterprise with patient outcomes that equal those of the best programs in the nation.

UT Southwestern is one of only seven centers in the United States to receive a SPORE (Specialized Program of Research Excellence) grant from the National Institutes of Health for lung-cancer research. Dr. Minna and his longtime collaborator, Dr. Adi Gazdar, professor of pathology, are working to identify the mechanisms involved in tumor suppression and cell growth. Their work seeks to discover biomarkers for people at high risk for lung cancer before they develop cancer.

The UT Southwestern Center for Breast Care, directed by Dr. Phil Evans, has a national reputation of excellence for providing the latest diagnostic technology, combining digital mammography, magnetic resonance imaging and ultrasound. The director of the Komen/UT Southwestern Breast Cancer Research program, Dr. Debasish “Debu” Tripathy, and his colleagues are developing medical treatments with chemo and hormonal therapy as well as newer biological approaches to prevent the return or spread of breast cancer.

The Department of Urology has collected a team of top-notch researchers and surgeons to tackle

(MORE)

Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center – 4

prostate cancer with the latest chemotherapeutic drugs and advanced minimally invasive laparoscopic surgery. Researchers are seeking to explore serum biomarkers to find early warning signs for prostate cancer.

The Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders at Children's Medical Center Dallas and UT Southwestern has gained an international reputation for clinical-care excellence in pediatric cancer under the leadership of Drs. George Buchanan and Naomi Winick, professors of pediatrics at UT Southwestern, who oversee one of the nation's largest and most highly regarded pediatric oncology programs.

Some of the center's other renowned clinical programs include brain cancer and gynecologic oncology. In-patient surgical and medical care for these and other malignant disorders is provided in the UT Southwestern University Hospitals – Zale Lipshy and St. Paul.

As the Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center strides to the next level of excellence, Dr. Willson and others acknowledge the trailblazing physician who has made great strides in establishing the excellent programs at UT Southwestern – Dr. Eugene Frenkel, professor of internal medicine.

Dr. Frenkel, who joined the UT Southwestern faculty in 1962, started its division of hematology/oncology and served as its chief for 30 years. Dr. Frenkel's research studies have focused on vitamin B₁₂, chemotherapy drug delivery and metabolic abnormalities in cancer. Over the years, he has helped bring more than 60 cancer researchers and clinicians to UT Southwestern, laying the groundwork for NCI designation.

"Dr. Willson has a unique and exciting vision for the Simmons Cancer Center, which already has made enormous progress in its rise to national prominence," said Dr. Kern Wildenthal, UT Southwestern president. "When Harold Simmons first entrusted us with his support in the 1980s, our cancer program was in its fledgling stage. Thanks to the excellent early leadership of Dr. Frenkel, and now Dr. Willson, we are positioned to move to the highest level of distinction as a world leader in cancer research and clinical care."

###

This news release is available on our World Wide Web home page at
<http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/home/news/index.html>

To automatically receive news releases from UT Southwestern via e-mail,
subscribe at www.utsouthwestern.edu/receivenews