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Gift of \$50,000 supports research of rare cancer complication

DALLAS – April 3, 2007 – A \$50,000 gift to UT Southwestern Medical Center from philanthropist Mitchel Lichtman will support research into a rare and deadly disease triggered by the onset of cancer.

The gift will establish the Elsie Lichtman Research Fund on Paraneoplastic Disease, named in honor of Mr. Lichtman’s mother, who died from the disease in 2006. Paraneoplastic syndrome (PNS) is an autoimmune response to the presence of cancer cells that results in inflammation and damage to the nervous system, causing devastating neurological symptoms.

The research of Dr. Steven Vernino, associate professor of neurology and one of the country’s foremost experts on PNS, will benefit directly from the Lichtman gift. His current studies focus on examining the spinal fluid of patients with the disease and comparing it to that of patients suffering from other neurological diseases, such as multiple sclerosis. He hopes the comparison may identify a unique pattern of activation in the immune system and lead to more precise diagnostics and treatments.

Dr. Vernino plans to initiate new treatment protocols for PNS. He also is conducting studies of neurological antibodies and how they affect the function of nerve cells.

“There has been very little that we can do once PNS causes permanent damage to the nervous system, so early diagnosis is a major challenge,” said Dr. Vernino. “Most of us who study this disease spend our time trying to raise awareness among neurologists and oncologists and developing better diagnostic tools and treatment options.”

Because PNS can present itself years before a malignancy is discovered, it is notoriously difficult to diagnose. Symptoms of PNS often mimic those of a number of other neurologic diseases affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves or muscles.

“PNS is relatively rare (affecting fewer than 1,000 Americans), so traditional sources of research funding are difficult to secure. Gifts like this one from Mr. Lichtman are critical to our ability to move forward with our research efforts, and I’m personally very grateful that he has chosen to support my work so generously,” Dr. Vernino said.

Dr. Vernino received his doctorate in neuroscience from Baylor College of Medicine in 1992 and a medical degree from Baylor in 1994. He joined the UT Southwestern faculty in 2004 after

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Lichtman gift – 2

completing residency and fellowship training at the Mayo Clinic.

“This generous contribution is greatly appreciated by the Department of Neurology and by all of us at the medical center,” said Dr. Kern Wildenthal, president of UT Southwestern. “Mitchel Lichtman’s support will be a significant resource for Dr. Vernino and his team, and will give greater hope to PNS patients.”

Mr. Lichtman, who lives in Henderson, Nev., is a professional baseball analyst, consultant and sabermetrics expert.

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UT Southwestern Medical Center, one of the premier medical centers in the nation, integrates pioneering biomedical research with exceptional clinical care and education. Its nearly 1,500 full-time faculty members – including four active Nobel Prize winners, more than any other medical school in the world – are responsible for groundbreaking medical advances and are committed to translating science-driven research quickly to new clinical treatments. UT Southwestern physicians provide medical care in 40 specialties to nearly 92,000 hospitalized patients and oversee 1.7 million outpatient visits a year.

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