

May 27, 2009

Arizona cancer doctor to get \$18 million grant

The Associated Press

(AP) — PHOENIX - A prominent cancer doctor and his team will get an \$18 million grant from a multimillion-dollar charitable drive against the disease.

The grant will be the largest of five to be announced Wednesday by Stand Up to Cancer, a nonprofit created by scientists and members of the entertainment industry a year ago with one goal-to quickly turn scientific discoveries into better care and cures for cancer patients.

Dr. Daniel Von Hoff, physician in chief of the Translational Genomics Research Institute, or TGen, will co-manage one of five teams that will collectively receive \$73.6 million over three years to study cutting-edge approaches to fighting cancer.

The five teams will focus on cancers including breast, ovarian, cervical, uterine, brain, lung, rectal, prostate and colon. Von Hoff's team will focus on new approaches to treating pancreatic cancer, one of the deadliest forms of the disease.

"It is a dream come true to have these resources," said Von Hoff, a University of Arizona professor of medicine. "It is also a great sense of urgency and responsibility to deliver new therapies for our patients with pancreatic cancer."

Von Hoff and Dr. Craig B. Thompson, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Abramson Cancer Center, will work on a method to starve tumors. The goal is to ensure 80 percent of pancreatic cancer patients survive at least one year after they're diagnosed; currently, just 20 percent do.

Von Hoff's research project will develop tests to determine what nutrients pancreatic-cancer cells require to fuel their growth and survival. Understanding the cells' fuel supply will help scientists develop more individualized drug treatments with fewer side effects.

Von Hoff already does that with his work as chief scientific officer of Scottsdale Healthcare Clinical Research Institute, which is a partnership with TGen that oversees the use of experimental drugs on cancer patients. The Scottsdale Healthcare program already has tested about 30 drugs and drug combinations to attack cancer based on patients' genetic makeup; about half of them were for pancreatic cancer.

Thompson's research has focused on developing ways to starve cancer tumors to prevent their growth. If researchers figure out a way to block a tumor's energy source of amino acids, the theory is that the tumors may shrink or die.

Most of Stand Up to Cancer's grant money was raised during prime-time telecasts that aired on Sept. 5 on ABC, CBS and NBC and in more than 170 other countries.

Among the celebrities the charity has drawn to achieve its goals are Meryl Streep, Hilary Swank, Halle Berry, Jimmy Fallon, Lance Armstrong and Jennifer Aniston.