

Media Coverage

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Victorian-Californian stem cell study to investigate Multiple Sclerosis

A \$2.2 million project by Victorian and Californian researchers will assess whether stem cell therapies can be used to combat diseases such as Multiple Sclerosis and Type-1 diabetes, and help organ transplant recipients.

The project is the fifth to be funded through the \$28 million Victoria–California Stem Cell Alliance which was established in 2008 under the Biotechnology Strategic Development Plan.

Speaking at AusBiotech 2010 in Melbourne today, Victorian Innovation Minister Gavin Jennings said innovative autoimmune research like this could be the key to improving the quality of life for millions of people around the world suffering from multiple sclerosis, diabetes or requiring organ transplants.

“This project is critical to us learning more about how to regulate the immune system in a bid to enhance the potential of stem cell derived tissue transplants as therapies to combat MS and other conditions.

“The project highlights the value of collaboration between world-leading centres like Victoria and California in biotechnology and stem cell research. It is yet another demonstration of our commitment to take action to improve the quality of life for millions of people around the world,” Mr Jennings said.

With MS, the body's immune cells attack the central nervous system, affecting the ability of nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord to communicate with each other. The project will evaluate the use of stem cell approaches to develop alternative treatments for MS.

Leading neuro-immunologist Professor Claude Bernard of Monash Immunology and Stem Cell Laboratories, internationally renowned for his work in the underpinnings of MS, will lead the research team in Melbourne. Professor Kenneth Weinberg leads the Stanford University team.

“At the moment the initial triggers that activate Multiple Sclerosis remain unknown, but many studies suggest the body's immune system plays a role in the progression of MS,” Mr Jennings said.

“Success of the study is crucial to arriving at the goal of safely and successfully using stem cell therapies to treat disease and regenerate tissues.”

Multiple sclerosis affects approximately 2.5 million people worldwide. In Australia it is estimated that there are around 18,000 people with MS. Approximately \$35,500 is spent every year on treatment for an individual with multiple sclerosis.

The California Institute for Regenerative Medicine is co-funding the project with \$1.6 million for the research partners in California.