

# TGen scientist lands \$18 mil to fight cancer

## Grant aimed at extending lives of pancreatic-cancer patients

By Ken Alltucker  
THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

A prominent Valley cancer doctor and scientist and his team will receive an \$18 million grant from a star-studded, multimillion-dollar charitable initiative against cancer.

The grant is the largest of five to be announced today by Stand Up to Cancer, a philanthropic group 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 patients.



Dr. Daniel Von Hoff

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

Von Hoff's group will focus on new approaches to treating pancreatic cancer, one of the most deadly forms of the disease.

Collectively, the grants will support research that could improve diagnosis and treatment of cancers including breast, ovarian, cervical, uterine, brain, lung, rectal, prostate and colon.

It is the first round of grants awarded by Stand Up to Cancer, a charitable program of the Entertainment Industry Foundation established by media, entertainment and philanthropic leaders, including news anchor Katie

See **CANCER** Page A7

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**CANCER**  
Continued from A1

Couric, who have been affected by cancer. Most of the money for the grants was raised during prime-time telecasts that aired on Sept. 5 on ABC, CBS and NBC and in more than 170 other countries.

Von Hoff, who will be paired with a University of Pennsylvania scientist to develop methods to battle pancreatic cancer, said the grant money will help accelerate his molecular research. "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 to slow the progression of pancreatic cancer.

Just 20 percent of pancreatic-cancer patients survive more than a year after diagnosis. The team's goal is to increase life expectancy to ensure 80 percent of patients survive at least one year.

Their 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 those experimental-drug combinations have been for pancreatic cancer, which is Von Hoff's area of expertise.

Von Hoff said one approach that has proved promising involves combining gemcitabine, a drug that is federally approved to treat pancreatic cancer, with an experimental drug called nab-paclitaxel. When these drugs are used together, cancer tumors have shrunk in 46 percent of patients, Von Hoff said.

If those drugs are administered at correct dosages, Von Hoff says, pancreatic-cancer survivorship may be able to be extended beyond one year.

"We are encouraged by this," Von Hoff said. "I believe it is one of the reasons we were awarded the grant."

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

## 5 cancer-research grants

The five teams, whose three-year grant awards for cancer research are to be announced today, and their areas of focus:

- » Pancreatic cancer, \$18 million, team leaders from the University of Pennsylvania and the Translational Genomics Research Institute.
- » Molecular breast cancer, \$16.5 million, team leaders from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the University of California-Los Angeles.
- » Breast, ovarian and endometrial cancers, \$15 million, team leader from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.
- » How cancer spreads, \$15 million, team leader from Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center.
- » Designing anticancer agents, \$9.12 million, team leader from Johns Hopkins.

Source: Stand Up to Cancer

the tumors may shrink or die.

The four other research teams have designated areas of study, focusing on:

- » Molecular pathways and genetic mutations that contribute to cancers.
- » Using nanotechnology to analyze tumor cells circulating in the body.
- » New approaches to treating breast cancers.
- » Studying genetic changes to design targeted anticancer agents.

Stand Up to Cancer has raised more than \$100 million through donations. The group was launched in the fall of 2007 by a group of women whose lives were touched by cancer. The charity seeks to raise money for translational research; that is, research focused on moving discoveries from the lab to patients in a timely fashion.

From network telecasts to commercials featuring celebrities, the charity has drawn star power to achieve its goals. Celebrities such as Jennifer Aniston, Meryl Streep, Lance Armstrong, Halle Berry, Hilary Swank, Jimmy Fallon and Keanu Reeves appeared on the show.

The group also has received major donations from Major League Baseball, Jones Apparel Group founder and cancer-research philanthropist Sidney Kimmel, several corporations and AARP.

Phoenix-area bioscience interests said the grant shows the momentum of the area's biotech initiative, which emphasizes the translational approach favored by the charity. Scottsdale Healthcare officials also cited the grant as national recognition for the hospital's clinical-trials program it operates with TGen.

"Patients in our community already have access to groundbreaking research through our collaboration with TGen," said Keith Jones, a Scottsdale Healthcare spokesman.