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Karmanos Cancer Institute Immunology Researcher Obtains Nearly \$1 Million National Institutes of Health Grant

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DETROIT, Oct. 20 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Venuprasad K. Poojary, Ph.D., assistant professor at the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute and Wayne State University School of Medicine, has secured a two-year federal grant for almost \$1 million to further his research into creating more effective immunotherapy strategies for cancer treatment. Dr. Poojary's grant brings the total number of federal stimulus grant dollars received by Karmanos researchers to approximately \$8 million this year.

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Among the more than 20,000 applications the National Institutes of Health received for the NIH Challenge Grants, Dr. Poojary's application ranked within the top 1 percent. He received a grant for \$999,094. The NIH has allocated \$200 million for the challenge grants for fiscal years 2009 and 2010. They are part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 passed in February of this year.

Dr. Poojary's research is titled, "Role of TIEG1 in Foxp3+Treg development and tumor progression," and explores tumor pathways that cause effector T cells, those that help maintain a healthy immune system, to be converted to regulator T cells, which allow the growth of cancerous tumor cells.

Researchers have already created vaccines that are effective in controlling regulator T cells in the lab environment, but so far immunotherapy vaccines have not been successful when used on humans.

"Immunotherapy for cancer has not been successful because tumors exploit the immune system," Dr. Poojary said. "We must now build on immunotherapy's great cancer treatment potential by learning how we can make it more effective."

Dr. Poojary's research strives to understand on a molecular level how immune suppressor cells can be controlled so that tumor cells do not proliferate. He believes this research will provide him and his colleagues significant new insight to overcome the limitations of current immunotherapy strategies.

"We want to develop inhibitors for regulator T cells to use along with tumor vaccines, and our goal is to block the development of tumor-promoting regulator T cells in the tumor microenvironment," he said. "People have tried to deplete regulator T cells from the body using antibodies, but such an approach is associated with the risk of triggering autoimmunity in patients."

The nearly \$1 million NIH grant will allow Dr. Poojary and his staff to invest the grant monies in what they need to conduct work more quickly and efficiently. As part of the grant, Dr. Poojary will hire four people to assist him. Without the grant, he says this research would have been very difficult.

"If we can understand the pathway of T cells, we will be very close to determining the inhibitors for what converts good cells into tumor-promoting bad cells," he said. "This is the hard step, but I am very confident that I will achieve my goals with the project."

Dr. Poojary says it will be significant when doctors can control the conversion of normal T cells into abnormal cells that allow tumors to grow. "With this knowledge, we would be very close to having the immunological tools to more effectively treat aggressive cancers, such as locally-advanced and metastatic breast cancer, prostate cancer and brain cancer," according to Dr. Poojary. He said he is fascinated by the intricacies of the immune system and how systems differ from patient to patient.

"I'm interested in knowing how the immune system works," he said. "Immunotherapy is the future for cancer treatment and it can be developed for any disease. Immunotherapy is much safer, but we have to improve the efficiency of tumor vaccines so that you get more specific and longer-lasting effects."

Dr. Poojary has been studying immunology since 1998 when he began his doctorate studies at the National Center for Cell Science in Pune, India. After receiving his Ph.D., he served as a postdoctoral fellow and later a research scientist in the Division of Cell Biology at LaJolla Institute for Allergy and Immunology in San Diego, Calif. He has been with the Karmanos Cancer Institute since March 2009.

About the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute

Located in mid-town Detroit, MI, the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute is one of 40 National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer centers in the United States. Caring for nearly 6,000 new patients annually on a budget of \$216 million, conducting more than 700 cancer-specific scientific investigation programs and clinical trials, the Karmanos Cancer Institute is among the nation's best cancer centers. Through the commitment of 1,000 staff, including nearly 300 faculty members, and supported by thousands of volunteer and financial donors, the Institute strives to prevent, detect and eradicate all forms of cancer. For more information call 1-800-KARMANOS or go to karmanos.org.

SOURCE Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute

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Send comments and feedback to:

Peter Barfoot Managing Director, BioPortfolio Ltd.

UK Tel: (+44) 1300 321501

USA Voicemail and Fax: (+1) 415 680 2472

[Peter Barfoot peter.barfoot@bioportfolio.com](mailto:peter.barfoot@bioportfolio.com)

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