

\$100 million in grants thrill Medical Center

By TODD ACKERMAN Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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Medical Center institutions will receive more than \$100 million in research grants as part of a \$5 billion stimulus package President Barack Obama announced Wednesday to fight disease and create jobs.

The program, which Obama called “the single largest boost to biomedical research in history,” will fund cutting-edge research, the hiring of researchers and other staff, and laboratory and equipment upgrades.

Targets include cancer, heart disease and autism, with an emphasis on genetic causes.

“This is huge,” said Susan Hamilton, senior vice president and dean of research at Baylor College of Medicine. “It couldn’t have come at a better time, given the economic uncertainty and the slowdown in government funding the last decade.

“It’ll save research jobs and create new ones, provide money for training, allow institutions to improve labs.”

Under the program, some grants of which are still to be awarded, Baylor has received more than \$37 million, the most in the state; the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center more than \$29 million; and the UT Health Science Center at Houston nearly \$24 million.

The National Institutes of Health is awarding the grants.

Baylor and M.D. Anderson are waiting on the awarding of grants involving the Cancer Genome Atlas project, an effort to understand the genetic underpinnings of cancer.

The program includes \$175 million for the national project, and Baylor and M.D. Anderson are expecting more than \$10 million apiece.

Richard Gibbs, director of Baylor's human genome sequencing center, said the cancer genome project is “going fabulously” and should produce diagnostic tests that replace existing ones in a few years.

Gibbs said that when all is said and done, the additional funding will double the Baylor's center's \$50 million budget.

The biggest individual winner of the stimulus funding was Eric Boerwinkle, a UT-Houston geneticist who has spent much of his career studying the reason why heart disease runs deep in some families but not others.

The awards announced Wednesday included more than \$12 million for a research project he's leading into genetic susceptibilities to heart, lung and blood diseases.

\$14 million grant

Still to be announced is Boerwinkle's grant for the project's second year — an additional \$14 million. It is the biggest single grant in Texas and one of the biggest in all states.

Work on grants typically doesn't begin for months after they're awarded, but Boerwinkle said his “official start date is today.”

“We're hitting the ground running,” said Boerwinkle. “That's a must when you need to spend a \$26 million budget in two years.”

Boerwinkle said spending would come on equipment, hiring and the preparation of research material.

Under the program, proposals had to spell out how the project would improve the economy.

Risks and rewards

The program also called for high-risk, high-reward projects, a contrast with the more conservative approach usually favored by the NIH.

Officials at Baylor, UT-Houston and MD Anderson all agreed with Obama that there's never been a single biomedical research boost like this before.

Dr. Peter Davies, UT-Houston's vice president for research, said the institution ultimately will receive \$45 million from the program in the next two years, a significant chunk considering it got \$91 million in traditional funding from the NIH in 2008.

Others getting money

Other local institutions awarded grant money through the program include the **UT Medical Branch at Galveston, with \$10.5 million**; the Texas A&M Health Science Center, with \$6.4 million; the University of Houston; with \$3.4 million; and Rice with \$3.2 million.

The program is funded through the \$787 billion federal economic stimulus program the president signed into law in February.

Obama said the new grants will support 2,000 projects and create tens of thousands of jobs.

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