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Pfizer Commits $4M to North Carolina Biotechnology Center Gene Therapy Fellowship Program

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RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, N.C. Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2017 The North Carolina Biotechnology Center (NC Biotech Center) has announced that Pfizer Inc. (NYSE: PFE) has committed to providing funding in the amount of $4 million which will enable the NC Biotech Center to establish and administer a multi-year academic fellowship program to help advance North Carolina's fast-growing expertise in gene therapy.

The new program, to be managed by the NC Biotech Center, will support distinguished postdoctoral fellowships in North Carolina university research laboratories providing advanced scientific training in gene therapy-related research.

Absent or faulty proteins linked to genetic mutations cause numerous devastating diseases, making gene therapy an increasingly important treatment strategy.

Pfizer's portfolio in North Carolina has grown in recent years. The company already operates a pharmaceutical manufacturing facility in the Lee County community of Sanford, and in August 2016, it acquired leading-edge gene therapy company Bamboo Therapeutics, Inc. in Chapel Hill.

With that acquisition, Pfizer gained the expertise of Bamboo's world renowned co-founder, R. Jude Samulski, Ph.D., former director of the Gene Therapy Center at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill. The deal also included an 11,000-square-foot facility for the highly specialized manufacturing of recombinant adeno-associated viral vectors.

Pfizer is one of several biopharmaceutical companies that have added high-profile gene therapy acquisitions, and several partnerships with biotechnology companies and leading academic institutions, to its R&D portfolio. Numerous other North Carolina scientists and companies are also making significant inroads into gene therapy, gene editing and related applications, many with NC Biotech Center support. For example, Samulski was recruited to UNC in 1993 as part of a $430,000 NC Biotech Center grant. Additionally, Bamboo's former parent company received more than $700,000 in NC Biotech Center grants and loans.

Gene therapy advances require specific skills in addition to deep scientific knowledge. The fellowship program being established with Pfizer's funding aims to boost that talent pipeline, with talent that has already proven to be exceptional in North Carolina. Such funding will enable the NC Biotech Center to provide two-year fellowship support to postdoctoral scientists. The funding will afford the NC Biotech Center the ability to cover salaries, benefits, materials, professional development and travel for such postdoctoral scientists. The NC Biotech Center will encourage competitive applications from scientists interested in establishing research careers in gene therapy and related research activities.

The NC Biotech Center will also create and manage a related Gene Therapy Intellectual Exchange Group (IEG). It will join some 25 other exchange groups designed to unite NC-based academic and industry scientists with shared professional interests. The Gene Therapy IEG will include these new postdoctoral fellows, their mentors, and others interested in the burgeoning gene therapy sector.

“The field of gene therapy research has made tremendous strides in recent years, and we are pleased to be able to further enhance our leadership position in this area through this unique fellowship program,” said Mikael Dolsten, MD, PhD, president of worldwide research and development at Pfizer. “We believe that gene therapy may hold the promise of bringing true disease modification for patients suffering from devastating diseases, and North Carolina is uniquely positioned to help us take advantage of collaborative opportunities that can develop the specialized talent we’ll need.”

Doug Edgeton, president and CEO of the NC Biotech Center, said he was deeply honored that Pfizer targeted North Carolina, and the NC Biotech Center, for the groundbreaking fellowship program.

“Pfizer embraced the opportunity to work with us given we’ve proven for more than 30 years that we have the expertise and success metrics to maximize impact,” said Edgeton. “We not only have outstanding research institutions across our state, but we also have a well-respected culture of partnering and collaboration that allows us to be nimble and responsive. This is a wonderful example.”

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