

NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release: Tuesday, December 1, 2009

New \$19.5-million national research network to study child brain development Focus on cerebral palsy, autism and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders

(Vancouver – December 1, 2009) – Dr. Daniel Goldowitz of the Centre for Molecular Medicine and Therapeutics (CMMT) at the Child & Family Research Institute (CFRI) will lead a new national research network to understand brain development in children, the federal government announced today. Hosted by the University of British Columbia, the network will focus on researching the genetic and environmental causes of cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorders, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. It will train the next generation of researchers in pediatric brain development, and it will disseminate new knowledge into improved diagnosis, treatments and interventions that will inform care delivery and policy decisions.

Called NeuroDevNet, the network will receive \$19.5 million in funding over five years from the Networks of Centres of Excellence of Canada (NCE), a joint program of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and Industry Canada.

“This is hugely exciting because we can do worlds of good to help children overcome developmental disorders,” says NeuroDevNet’s scientific director Dr. Dan Goldowitz, Senior Scientist at CMMT and CFRI and Professor in the Department of Medical Genetics at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Dr. Goldowitz holds a Canada Research Chair in Developmental Neurogenetics.

“The network will seamlessly combine lab research – studying how the brain develops and how to fix it when it develops poorly – with the clinical situation as babies develop in utero and until three years of age,” says Dr. Goldowitz. “We’ll bring in basic researchers to model brain development and test interventions, we’ll involve parents so they’re aware of what we’re doing, and we’ll share best practices with clinicians. The knowledge gained will provide proof of principle and contribute to discovering diagnostics and developing therapeutics. The earlier we can diagnose and intervene with the children, the bigger the effect on their developmental outcomes.”

NeuroDevNet is the first trans-Canadian effort devoted to brain development from both basic and clinical perspectives. The research network will bring together Canadian experts in clinical assessment and treatment, genetics and epigenetics, imaging, model organisms, knowledge translation, informatics, and neuroethics. The network’s goals for the first five years include discovering the genes involved in brain dysfunction.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) share characteristics such as impairments in socialization and communication, repetitive interests and behaviours. ASD affects more than 52,000 Canadian children and youth under the age of 20.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders are estimated to occur as frequently as one in every 100 live births in North America. Alcohol exposure during pregnancy causes mild to moderate brain dysfunctions in processes such as memory, executive function, social communication, attention span, motor and sensory differences.

Cerebral palsy occurs in approximately 2.5 per 1000 live births in developed countries.

NeuroDevNet involves collaborators from the following institutions: Dalhousie University, McGill University, McMaster University, Queen's University, Simon Fraser University, University of Alberta, University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, University of Manitoba, University of Montreal, University of Saskatchewan, University of Toronto, University of Western Ontario, and York University.

CFRI conducts discovery, clinical and applied research to benefit the health of children and families. It is the largest institute of its kind in Western Canada. CFRI works in close partnership with the University of British Columbia, BC Children's Hospital and Sunny Hill Health Centre for Children, BC Women's Hospital & Health Centre, agencies of the Provincial Health Services Authority, and BC Children's Hospital Foundation. CFRI has additional important relationships with BC's five regional health authorities and with BC academic institutions Simon Fraser University, the University of Victoria, the University of Northern British Columbia, and the British Columbia Institute of Technology. For more information, visit www.cfri.ca.

CMMT is a synergistic group of scientists and researchers who share a strong sense of commitment to solve the many genetic questions surrounding human illness and well being. Affiliated with UBC and CFRI, CMMT conducts discovery research and translates that research into effective clinical and therapeutic strategies to promote health. For more information, visit: www.cmmt.ubc.ca.

UBC is one of Canada's largest and most prestigious public research and teaching institutions and consistently ranks among the top 40 universities in the world. It offers a range of innovative undergraduate, graduate and professional programs in the arts, sciences, medicine, law, commerce and other faculties. UBC has particular strengths in biotechnology, ranks in the top 10 universities in North America and number one in Canada for commercializing research and for its patent activity in the life sciences. For more information, visit www.ubc.ca.

– 30 –

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