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Grant to aid work of stem cell groundbreaker

An internationally known pioneer in using umbilical cord stem cells will research novel cerebral palsy treatments thanks to a $10.2 million gift to Duke University.

The money from the Robertson Foundation will establish a Translational Cell Therapy Center at Duke for cell-based treatments, notably the work of Dr. Joanne Kurtzberg. It is the latest large donation from private sources to advance medical research at local universities.

Kurtzberg has used umbilical cord cells to treat cancer and genetic disorders in children. In many cases, infusions of cord blood have reversed and even cured otherwise fatal disorders. Kurtzberg has recently begun using the once-discarded material in hopes it can also mend brain damage in children diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

"I don't think we'd be able to do this research without this grant," Kurtzberg said. "When you are doing work at that cutting edge, you don't have enough preliminary data to get funding in traditional ways."

Dr. Victor Dzau, chancellor for Health Affairs at Duke, said the Robertson Foundation gift will speed new cell therapies to patients. In addition to funding Kurtzberg's cerebral palsy study, the money will establish a specialized laboratory where therapeutic cells can be made and stored, benefiting cell scientists throughout the medical center.

"It's a significant gift," Dzau said, "creating a place where we are doing state-of-the-art work."

The Robertson money comes on the heels of more than $150 million in scientific research grants to Triangle institutions from federal tax stimulus dollars. Last week, Duke announced a $12 million gift to its eye center, and UNC-Chapel Hill officials last year received $22 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for health projects in Africa.

Julian Robertson Jr., a North Carolina native who established the foundation to advance work in medicine, education, environmental stewardship and religion, was out of the country and unavailable for comment. He is the founder of Tiger Management.

In a prepared statement, Robertson said Kurtzberg's work "has the potential to change the lives of thousands of children throughout the country and around the world."

Umbilical cord blood

Kurtzberg has long been at the forefront of regenerative medicine, and was among the first to prove that umbilical cord blood was a viable alternative to bone marrow for use in transplants.

The blood is rich in stem cells, which are prized because they haven't yet specialized and can therefore build healthy cells and tissue where damage or deficiencies have caused problems. They appear to work in three ways: repairing damage, particularly if they're infused soon after an injury has occurred; recruiting other healing cells to help with repairs; and replacing dead or damaged cells.
In 1988, Kurtzberg successfully used cord blood in a transplant to treat a child with Fanconi anemia, a rare genetic disease in which the bone marrow fails to produce adequate immune cells and blood clotting agents.

She has since blazed trails using umbilical cord blood to treat leukemia, metabolic disorders and sickle cell disease, and her clinic at Duke attracts parents from around the world seeking cord blood transplants for their children. Many have banked their children's umbilical cords, and others have used donated cells from a public bank Kurtzberg has helped build at Duke.

Now she's targeting cerebral palsy. The condition, marked by problems with muscle coordination, affects an estimated 2 in 1,000 children worldwide. Often caused by oxygen deprivation or trauma during birth, cerebral palsy has no cure. Current treatments include physical therapy and drugs that reduce seizures.

Proving the treatment

Marla Dunlap, a mother of three from Arlington, Texas, arrived at Duke this week seeking an infusion of cord blood for her 7-year-old son, Cayden. The youngster, who wears braces but can walk and run, has cerebral palsy after suffering a stroke before he was born.

A registered nurse, Dunlap said she and her husband decided to bank Cayden's cord blood when he was born, hoping stem cell science would one day provide a treatment to help their son.

Then one morning last summer, she saw a network television program featuring a family of a child with cerebral palsy who had been treated by Kurtzberg at Duke.

"For me, it was the theory that the cells will go to where the damaged parts are in the body, hoping to regenerate parts of the brain that were injured," Dunlap said.

She said Cayden qualified for a small trial Kurtzberg has been running to test whether cord blood infusions are safe for children with cerebral palsy. He underwent the 30-minute infusion Tuesday as an outpatient. Dunlap said she will monitor his progress at home in Texas and report to Kurtzberg periodically.

Kurtzberg said that trial, which is continuing, has had tantalizing results in the first 188 patients, showing little danger and possible improvements. But it's ultimately inconclusive.

"We couldn't say one way or another if it was beneficial," she said, "because children with cerebral palsy naturally will improve to some degree. What we have to show is that they improve more than they would have anyway."

And that's where the Robertson Foundation funding will help, Kurtzberg said. With some of the money, she will begin a new cerebral palsy study in which children who are infused with cord blood are compared to children who have received a placebo infusion. Only that kind of comparison can prove the intervention is a success.

Cord blood banks

Kurtzberg said if proof of the procedure's effectiveness is established, the study could change the way cord blood is managed.
Currently, many parents, such as the Dunlaps, pay to store their children’s cord blood in private, for-profit banks. Kurtzberg has been a proponent of a national, public bank.

The one at Duke draws donations from eight hospitals in North Carolina, plus several others across the nation where the donated cells are publicly available for children and even adults who need transplants.

Kurtzberg would like cord blood to be automatically collected and stored at every hospital, as a matter of national policy.

"But that's something for another day," she said.

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Bill on personnel records planned

Personnel information on salaries, disciplinary actions and hiring decisions for public employees could be more available to taxpayers under legislation a Republican leader says he will seek to introduce in the coming session.

Senate Minority Leader Phil Berger said he wants to draft legislation that would make public salary and employment histories, disciplinary actions such as suspensions or firings, and hiring information about successful job applicants. He said making that information public shows that government is open to the taxpayers who pay the bills, and may prevent cases in which employees who have behaved badly can move quietly from one agency to another.

"You've got the principle of the information should be available to the public, by itself," said Berger, a Rockingham County Republican. "But then you've got the specific instances of harm caused to some citizen or some child that might have been prevented."

The legislation would be a major overhaul for a personnel law that has been on the books since 1975. A series published in The News & Observer this week, "Keeping Secrets," found the law to be among the most secretive in the nation. The result is that the public often receives little information regarding employees who have received big pay raises over several years, were hired through patronage or nepotism, or behaved badly on the job. Berger said he was particularly troubled by the case of a New Hanover County teacher who had been twice suspended for inappropriate contact with a student, but then resigned and was hired by the Pitt County school district. Pitt County officials did not know about the suspensions.

Jessica Wishnask is now serving prison time for taking indecent liberties with a minor after Wilmington police caught her "in intimate contact" with the same 15-year-old student.

Berger, a Republican, would need agreement from Democrats to change the law. Recently, other legislative leaders and Gov. Bev Perdue indicated that the personnel law was too restrictive, but they differed on what needed to be changed.

Perdue, for example, said only salary and employment histories should be public, while Senate leader Marc Basnight said the case of former state trooper Michael Steele suggests that those convicted of serious felonies on the job should not expect their personnel files to remain closed.

The Highway Patrol and Crime Control Secretary Reuben Young have declined to open Steele's personnel and training files after he was convicted of abducting three women while on patrol in Orange County and attempting to have sex with them.

Perdue, a New Bern Democrat, could not be reached for comment this week. A spokesman for Basnight said he has asked three Democratic senators from districts with a high percentage of state employees to examine the law and make recommendations. The senators are Doug Berger of Youngsville, Dan Blue of Raleigh and Steve Goss of Boone.
Blue, a former House speaker, said the law should be examined.

"You've identified some key areas now where the inquiry is legitimate," Blue said. "There has to be some reason, other than just an inconvenience, as to why generally the public ought not to be able to get access."

Lawmakers do not typically take on new issues in sessions during even-numbered years. But House Speaker Joe Hackney, an Orange County Democrat, said if House members show the willingness to tackle the issue this session, which begins May 12, he is receptive to having it move forward.

State Sen. David Hoyle, a Gaston County Democrat who has championed open government legislation, said he and his colleagues should take up reforms. Given the tight budget situation, he expects lawmakers will have a longer session than usual, which would give them the time to take it up.

Public employee groups and government organizations such as the N.C. League of Municipalities have long resisted allowing more personnel information to be public. They worry that it will lead to employee abuses and prevent good candidates from applying for public jobs.

Jane Pinsky, director of the N.C. Coalition on Lobbying & Government Reform, a nonpartisan government watchdog, welcomed Phil Berger's efforts. She said the personnel law has long been on the coalition's list for reform.

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Why are college students so hard to count in the Census?

Updated 18h ago

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

Some uncertainty is understandable; most undergrads weren't even teens last time around. But for a variety of reasons, college students present a challenge to the Census Bureau.

For one thing, the timing is terrible. Many students take off for spring break in March, just as the Census campaign gears up. By the time enumerators follow up with non-responders in May, some students may be gone for the summer.

For another, the purpose is to count people based on where they live April 1, and for most traditional undergraduates, that will be a campus address. But some students, and parents, assume they are supposed to be counted in their hometowns. And some international students may mistakenly think they aren't supposed to complete the form at all.

Effect on the community

Privacy laws add another wrinkle. Administrators can't directly hand certain data, including race and gender, to Census takers, though many colleges help coordinate the process in dorms, fraternities and other campus housing.

There are exceptions. The College of Wooster in Ohio, where all but about 20 of 1,700 students live on campus, has arranged to release students' names, birth dates, dates of attendance and campus addresses to the Census. "We don't have to have every question answered in that situation," says the Census' David DeShon.
Practical matters aside, the Census can be a tough sell for other reasons. It "is not necessarily widely recognized as something connected to any of the issues college students feel passionate about," says Wake Forest University sociology professor Ana Wahl, who discusses the Census in classes on race and ethnicity.

Yet for the communities in which they live, the student count can make a big difference.

In Fort Collins, Colo., Colorado State University's 25,000 students represent 18% of the city's 140,000 residents. That translates to more than $200 million in potential federal funding in the next decade; the state's demography office estimates that each person counted brings in $880 a year.

"You start to do the math — what happens if you miss one or 10 or 1,000 students?" asks Ken Waido, the city's chief planner. "It adds up pretty quick."

'Great fear' it isn't confidential

A Fort Collins Census committee has stepped up outreach to students based on a review of past data that leads city officials to believe that, as a group, the 15,000 or so students who live off-campus have the highest probability of being undercounted.

The city faces an added challenge: A 2007 ordinance strengthened a law barring more than three unrelated people from living in a single dwelling. A 2009 study estimated that about 600 households were in violation.

By law, Census officials can't share answers with anyone, including federal, state and local agencies. But students have expressed skepticism. "There's a great fear out there that it's not going to be confidential," says Courtney Sullivan, director of community affairs for the student government.

On a website aimed at students, Census stresses confidentiality. Other key messages: Forms are easy to fill out, and the count affects services such as public transportation and health care as well as college tuition grant and loan programs.

Some regional Census offices also are engaging students through Facebook, podcasts and videos. And that points to one more challenge: Snail mail is hardly the communications mode of choice for students, but it's how forms arrive at most households and how they must be returned.

That may change. But for now, the most effective ways to reach students appear to be both modern and, in some cases, older than the Pony Express. "They're so mobile and electronic ... but they still use fliers, placards and bulletin boards," says University of Texas-Austin professor Keri Stephens, who has a Census Bureau grant to research students' use of communications technology.