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Business

Whitehead, Biogen team up on drug research

Goal of research collaboration is to better understand roots of disease, find therapies



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Biogen Idec, headquarters pictured above, will contribute \$5.2 million to fund Whitehead-led research projects.

By [Robert Weisman](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 25, 2014

Whitehead Institute, a biomedical research institution that has seeded many biotech start-ups and scientific labs in Cambridge's Kendall Square, is entering a scientific research collaboration with Biogen Idec Inc., the Cambridge biotechnology giant.

Under the alliance, set to be disclosed Tuesday, Biogen Idec will set aside \$5.2 million to bankroll four or five Whitehead-led research projects in the fields of immunology, neurology, developmental biology, and genetics over the next three years. The goal is to better understand what causes diseases and identify compounds that can be developed as drugs.

The collaboration — similar to other partnerships already launched — presents a model for closer ties between academic and industry scientists as the National Institutes of Health and other federal agencies scale back on money to support fundamental scientific research. Adjusted for inflation, NIH funding has fallen about 2 percent a year since 2004, according to analysts.

“It points to the future of where the support of basic research institutions may go,” suggested David Page, director of the Whitehead, which is affiliated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “Biogen Idec is stepping forward and saying it's time for the biopharmaceutical industry to support the very institutions that drew them to this city.”

Page said 25 to 30 percent of Whitehead's revenue comes from federal research grants, down from 52 percent a decade ago. The rest comes from royalties and licensing fees, grants from private foundations such as the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and corporate support for labs within Whitehead.

The joint research programs with Biogen Idec will mark the first time a biotechnology company will work with Whitehead in multiple areas.

Spyros Artavanis-Tsakonas, chief scientific officer at Biogen Idec, said his company's researchers specialize in using breakthroughs made in scientific laboratories to develop drugs for diseases such as multiple sclerosis and hemophilia. They will benefit from the knowledge of Whitehead scientists about the mechanics of diseases that have eluded treatments, such as Parkinson's and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known as ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease, he said.

"Whitehead is one of the premier research institutions in Boston and the world," Artavanis-Tsakonas said. "This will be a true scientific collaboration. Good drugs are based on absolutely first-rate research."

The partnership is the latest in the growing collaborations between drug makers and academic researchers, said Boston Consulting Group partner Michael Ringel, who focuses on the health care business. Ringel cited alliances in cancer and diabetes research between European pharmaceutical giants Bayer AG and Sanofi SA and University of California San Francisco researchers. He also cited US drug giant Pfizer Inc.'s Centers for Therapeutic Innovation, which work with university researchers in Boston and other cities to investigate a range of diseases.

"There's a natural synergy between academia and pharma in understanding disease and developing new drugs," Ringel said. "If you're an academic institution and one of the things you want is to get medicines to patients . . . you can't do it without the expertise that pharma companies bring."

Whitehead, located in the heart of Kendall Square, has had an outsized influence on

the development of the region's biopharmaceutical hubs, one of the world's largest.

Scientists from Whitehead have helped to launch Genzyme, Millennium Pharmaceuticals, Alnylam Pharmaceuticals, Ironwood Pharmaceuticals, and Verastem, along with the neighboring Broad Institute, another research organization.

Page said the idea of collaborating with Biogen Idec, also based in Kendall Square, grew out of a lunch conversation he had with the company's chief executive, George Scangos, who came by the Whitehead offices to visit him about a year ago.

"It's great to have a link between two institutions that are a five-minute walk," Page said. "Being a punctual sort, George gave himself 15 minutes and he got here 10 minutes early."

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