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Monday, January 5, 2009

NEWS | SAN DIEGO

CLOSE-UP: MITCHELL KROENBERG

Low profile but high priority

By PADMA NAGAPPAN, Special to the Daily Transcript
Friday, January 2, 2009

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A New York City transplant, Mitchell Kronenberg, an immunologist and the president and scientific director of the La Jolla Institute for Allergy and Immunology (LIAI), did not know how to drive a car when he arrived in Pasadena to pursue his Ph.D. from the California Institute of Technology.

"I knew how to ride the subway," said Kronenberg, who along with his sister, was the first generation in his family to go to college. "My grandparents were Russian Jews who emigrated from Eastern Europe. My parents also did not go to school."

He went to Columbia University and received a B.S. in biochemistry. He had a brilliant genetics professor and for one of his classes, students read a book that described who did what kind of research at specific locations and Kronenberg found that there were many interesting research projects coming out of Pasadena at that time, which prompted him to move west.

He stayed on to complete his post-doctoral work and then joined the University of California, Los Angeles medical school faculty in 1986 where he rose through the ranks to become full professor.

He joined the LIAI in 1997 as the head of the division of developmental immunology. The LIAI, a world leader in immunology research, is a nonprofit biomedical research institute and the only one in San Diego that focuses solely on solving immune system diseases. In November, it celebrated its 20th anniversary.



Mitchell Kronenberg, an immunologist, is the president and scientific director of the La Jolla Institute for Allergy and Immunology.

In just the past year, its researchers have made important findings about type 1 diabetes, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, asthma, smallpox and dengue virus, findings which could one day help improve or even save the lives of millions of people.

In the area of biodefense, Shane Crotty, Ph.D., principal investigator at the LIAI, identified an antibody that could be the nation's first line of defense in protecting against a potential terrorist smallpox outbreak.

Several researchers led by Matthias von Herrath, M.D., are edging closer to their goal of finding a cure for type 1 diabetes, which is the less common and more dangerous form of the disease where the body is simply incapable of processing insulin.

The team has developed a combination therapy that shows significant promise for this disease if it is caught in the early stages. The therapy is currently in clinical trials.

Cancer is another area where the institute has made strides. "Our investigators have discovered molecular interactions that can be used to amp up the immune response to cancer. One of our team members is working on lymphoma and leukemia (research)," Kronenberg said.

Kronenberg and his own laboratory team of 14 researchers have made a critical discovery about the bacteria that causes Lyme disease, which is becoming more prevalent today and is spread most commonly through the bite of a tick.

They found that the bacteria stimulate an attack on the natural killer T-cells, which are valuable in defending against infection. Scientists are now hoping that this discovery will help create a vaccine for the virus.

The LIAI has 18 independent labs and 274 employees, out of which 185 are research scientists. Funding for this year was \$34 million, which will go up to \$39 million for 2009.

It is looking for additional donor support to help fund new critical research that is not covered by grant funding from the National Institutes of Health.

The majority of the funds are derived from competitive NIH research grants. Private foundations fund a small percentage of the annual budget and about 15 percent is courtesy of Kirin Holdings, a Japanese company best known in the West as a beer maker, which also has a pharmaceutical business. The LIAI does contract research work for Kirin.

Despite all this, the LIAI has been very much under the radar and is not as well-known as other institutes. "We're a well-kept secret in San Diego. One reason for this is because we started out much smaller than we are now. The other thing is that we felt we could rely on NIH support and some contributions from corporate sponsors like Kirin," Kronenberg said.

The institute was half its size when he came aboard in 1997. He considers the steady growth it has had as one of his major accomplishments. It has been able to draw researchers from across the country, who chose to work at the institute in spite of having the opportunity to be associated with more well-known organizations.

"Our collegial atmosphere and institutional support is one reason why they join us. Also, San Diego is a big lure and it has a great research community and biotech hub here. And with the housing crisis, homes are now less

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expensive," he said.

The collegial atmosphere has been there from the beginning, but Kronenberg said that it has to be fostered continuously.

"I think there are two things that help us maintain it -- we all do some type of immunology research, so we understand each other, and the other thing is that we take really good care of our people. They receive a higher degree of institutional support, which gives them more freedom and flexibility. This sets us apart," he said.

Aside from his leadership role, Kronenberg is also a highly cited scientist and conducts an extremely vigorous research program, currently working on five NIH project grants simultaneously.

This puts him in the top one percent of scientists nationwide in terms of the number of NIH grants held concurrently.

He highlighted the importance of the institute's focus on the immune system, stating that if the system misfires it can cause diseases everywhere. "The public does not understand the importance of the immune system and the underlying causes for cancer and other diseases. I passionately believe that studying it will truly benefit people and have a huge impact on human health."

Nagappan is a San Diego-based freelance business writer.

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