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Latest on Epilepsy

01-11-2013 | €11.5m EU funding grant for Irish-led epilepsy research

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An international epilepsy research consortium led by Prof. David Henshall from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) has been announced as one of the recipients of research funding under the European Union's Framework Programme 7.



The EpimRNA Consortium, involving 16 partners from 8 European countries, the USA and Brazil has received an €11.5 million grant to investigate molecular mechanisms, diagnostics and treatments for epilepsy.

This major award will be used to uncover the effects of a newly discovered molecule called microRNA in epilepsy. It is thought that microRNA may play a critical role in controlling the changes in brain chemistry that accompany the development and course of epilepsy.

The Consortium represents an exciting and major interdisciplinary effort between epilepsy researchers, geneticists, clinicians and experts in advanced molecular sciences working together to understand molecular mechanisms in epilepsy and to develop new microRNA-based therapeutics to prevent the development of epilepsy, the occurrence of seizures and even reverse epilepsy once established.

An emerging consensus worldwide is that the failure to identify better therapies for epilepsy in recent years is due to a lack of understanding of the epileptogenic process (the process through which one's brain becomes prone to seizures) and the inability to use that knowledge to invent new drugs. Tackling the complexities of epileptogenesis is therefore considered a key priority in epilepsy research.

Prof. Henshall explains: "Improved understanding of the causes of epilepsy is critical to the development of more effective treatments and, hopefully, a cure. The EpimRNA consortium will build on recent scientific breakthroughs that identified a new family of molecules controlling brain cell structure and function – microRNAs. We will now take the first ever large-scale international effort to uncover the complete spectrum of effects of microRNA in epilepsy, from designing drugs of the future to genetic tests and diagnostics."

In addition to Prof. Henshall, who heads the consortium, the RCSI's Prof. Norman Delanty, Prof. Jochen Prehn and Dr Gianpiero Cavalleri are also working on the project as academic partners along with world-leading experts from Germany, Netherlands, the UK, Italy, Brazil, Denmark and the US. These consortium members have already pioneered discoveries on brain-specific miRNAs, established that miRNA changes are a feature of temporal lobe epilepsy and have demonstrated that altering miRNA function can suppress epileptic seizures and seizure-damage.

Prof. Norman Delanty adds: "This is a new and exciting area of epilepsy research that may prove to be groundbreaking in treating the 30% –40% of patients whose

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seizures cannot today be controlled by medication or surgical means. There is a huge need to find new ways to manage epilepsy in these difficult-to-control cases and microRNA and their antagonists may well offer solutions. It is something that I and my colleagues from all over the world are looking forward to investigating in detail over the next five years and we will be inviting patients at the Beaumont Epilepsy Monitoring Unit to take part in our research efforts in the near future."

Mike Glynn, Epilepsy Ireland CEO said: "Our congratulations to Prof Henshall and colleagues on receiving this award and we wish them well in their quest to shed further light on epilepsy over the next five years. We are particularly delighted that funding provided to Prof. Henshall and his team through the Epilepsy Ireland research funding scheme in recent years has played a role in achieving this major EU grant. As we have pointed out on many occasions, there is a huge appetite and expertise in Ireland for conducting world-class epilepsy research and it is very satisfying to see that recognised. This award will establish Ireland as a leading centre of cutting-edge epilepsy research and that can only be good news for people with epilepsy here."

We will of course keep you updated on the Consortium's progress. For a more detailed description of the project see: www.epimirna.eu.

Three other epilepsy projects have received funding under FP7's Mental health, neurology and pain call – A Polish led project project looking at biomarkers in tuberous sclerosis, a Swedish study on targets and biomarkers for antiepileptogenesis and an Italian-led project on prevention and treatment in children with difficult to treat epilepsy.

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