



The Oral Cancer Foundation Issues First Research Grants

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif., Nov. 20 /PRNewswire/ -- The Oral Cancer Foundation announced today that three researchers working in areas of early oral cancer detection would be the foundation's first grant recipients.

The grants, which were made as an ongoing commitment to each researcher, were awarded to Dr. Maura Gillison of Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Dr. David Wong of the University of California at Los Angeles, and Dr. Ann Gillenwater of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

"We are supporting research that moves our early discovery agenda forward," the foundation's executive director Brian Hill said. "Early detection is our first front in reducing the death rate from oral cancer, and we believe these research programs all will have a huge impact on how and when people are diagnosed with the disease. Early detection and staging is directly correlated to better long-term outcomes for patients." The disease affects more than 34,000 Americans each year, and more than 8,000 will die from it annually. At the present time two-thirds of cases are caught in the cancer's later stages when prognosis is poor. At 5 years from diagnosis survival for all stages combined is approximately 50%. While other cancers have seen a decline in incidence and death, occurrence of oral and oropharyngeal cancers have increased in recent years, 11% in 2007 alone.

"Public awareness of the disease is low, and screening models used incorrectly or inconsistently are largely to blame for the high death rate," Hill said. "We could be doing a better job of early discovery. Patients need to know that an annual screening is inexpensive, painless, and takes only five minutes. But the lack of awareness-in both the health care community and the public's-of the newly defined viral etiology of oral cancer is now also to blame."

Oral cancer has been most usually associated with tobacco use, often in combination with alcohol consumption. However, new research over the last decade has pointed to the human papillomavirus (HPV-16), the same virus that causes the vast majority of all cervical cancers, as a significant risk factor, especially in cases affecting young non-smoking men and women.

Grant recipients.

Dr. Maura Gillison

Maura Gillison, MD, PhD, assistant professor of epidemiology of Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, merited headlines across the globe for her research on the role the HPV virus plays in the etiology of oral cancer, and without ambiguity defined the link between the two. Her work has changed the demographic norms for those previously considered

at risk for the disease, and has broad implications for developing preventative measures for HPV-positive patients and treatment options for oral cancer patients with HPV-derived cancer.

Dr. David Wong

David Wong, DMD, DMSc, director of the UCLA Dental Research Institute, is a nationally recognized expert in the emerging field of salivary diagnostics. Wong's work will yield an accurate, noninvasive test for very early detection of oral cancer, and likely other high-impact systemic diseases within a few years. It is the first viable option for conducting mass public screenings for oral cancer using only a small amount of saliva and a computer chip which looks for specific biomarkers. Given the shift in etiology of oral cancer cases away from the obvious potential patient identifiers like smoking to the less easily detectable virus, Wong's research will be instrumental in identifying those most at-risk for the disease.

Dr. Ann Gillenwater

Ann M. Gillenwater, MD, associate professor, department of head and neck surgery, the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, has been part of a pioneering team in the use of tissue fluorescence as a discovery tool in oral cancers. Tissue fluorescence, in which a specific spectrum of light is used to differentiate healthy cells from those which are not, will allow the health care professional to identify more readily areas of suspect tissue that may be missed in a conventional white light visual screening. This will improve the opportunity for early diagnosis, thus improving patient outcomes.

The Oral Cancer Foundation, a 501(c)3 non profit charity, founded in 2000, advocates for better public awareness of the disease, provides patient support mechanisms, and engages the medical and scientific communities to be more involved in the process of early detection. The foundation conducts screening events across the country and maintains a web site with hundreds of pages of information for patients, the public, and healthcare providers at www.oralcancer.org.