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South Florida “Fast-Track” Grant Recipients Report Important Strides in Research Efforts

FORT LAUDERDALE, FL, February 18, 2016 – Thanks to \$30,000 fast-track grants awarded by The Campbell Foundation, three South Florida HIV/AIDS research groups have been able to successfully obtain critical state and national funding to further their investigational efforts.

The fast-track grants were [awarded in July 2015](#) to Dr. Mathias Lichtenheld, associate professor, Department of Microbiology and Immunology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine; Dr. Ana Puga, Medical Director and Marie Hayes, MSW, Director of the Children’s Diagnostic and Treatment Center’s Comprehensive Family AIDS Program in Fort Lauderdale; and Dr. Massimo Caputi, associate professor of Biomedical Science at Florida Atlantic University’s Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine.

The fast-track award to Dr. Lichtenheld supported two research projects. One focused on how the very first cells infected by HIV in the body have a potential to attack the virus. The results were so interesting and became applicable to HIV Cure Research that the State of Florida awarded Dr. Lichtenheld another \$100,000 “to drill down deeper.”

“It is fair to say that The Campbell Foundation’s original support has been leveraged more than three times at this point,” said Dr. Lichtenheld. “And, this new research by our laboratory may become attractive for funding by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the future.”

The Campbell Foundation’s fast-track grant to FAU’s Dr. Caputi allowed him to make enough headway in his investigation for the NIH to award him a \$448,500 grant to further his research. Dr. Caputi’s efforts targeted the use of a cellular protein named SRSF1 to inhibit HIV replication in T-cells. These cells play a vital role in a person’s immune system and are attacked and destroyed by the virus.

“The three-year NIH grant titled ‘[Inhibition of HIV-1 replication by delivery of the SRSF1 RNA Recognition Motifs](#),’ will allow me to expand on my previous HIV research,” Dr. Caputi said.

“This research proposes to create a truncated version of SRSF1 in bacteria, purify it and deliver

it to infected cells using cell-penetrating peptides with high efficiency. This approach will inhibit viral replication ex-vivo in lymphocytes purified from healthy donors and infected by a number of viral strains.”

At the Children’s Diagnostic and Treatment Center, Dr. Ana Puga and Marie Hayes, MSW, are exploring the “real world feasibility and psychological impact” of the availability of Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) for high-risk youth and couples where one is HIV-positive and the other is not. PrEP is a once-a-day pill that prevents HIV infection. Those who do not have HIV, but who are at substantial risk of becoming infected, can take it.

The foundation’s financial assistance allowed the CDTC team to conduct research which resulted in the finding that high-risk youth were generally unaware of PrEP. A subsequent Youth Summit on the use of the drug was scheduled to increase general awareness. In addition, discussions also have taken place with the lead physician at the Centers for Disease Control, along with conversations with national field experts about this general lack of understanding and awareness of PrEP and what actions can be taken to improve awareness.

“These meetings have been extremely productive as there is little information on PrEP for this age group and it is imperative that the tool used be comprehensive and guide the future research and awareness of PrEP among young people,” said Dr. Puga.

Thanks to The Campbell Foundation’s seed funding, this project may be expanded through a grant from a major pharmaceutical company.

The Campbell Foundation’s mission for the past 21 years has been to fund nascent and groundbreaking research. With the data obtained from initial research many past grant recipients have been able to go on and obtain additional funding from larger organizations.

“It’s called seed funding for a reason,” said The Campbell Foundation’s Executive Director Ken Rapkin. “We provide the initial funding to get researchers’ work to flourish. Once they are able to achieve even small successes, scientists such as these three, often are able to obtain significantly more funding to continue their work. We are so pleased that all three of our fast-track grant recipients have recognized these achievements thus far and we wish them all the best in the future.”

PHOTOS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

Photo captions:

CDTC: Left to right: Marie Hayes, M.S.W., Director, Comprehensive Family AIDS Program, CDTC; Deborah Gilchrist, Senior Vice President, Commercial Banking, JP Morgan Chase and CDTC board member; Bill Venuti, Campbell Foundation Trustee; Ken Rapkin, Campbell Foundation Executive Director; Ana E. Calderon Randazzo, Ph.D., Executive Director, CDTC; Dr. Ana Puga, Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist, Primary Care Clinic, Principal Investigator, Research Program, CDTC; Dan Overbey, Chair, Managing Director, Atlantic Capital Advisors, CDTC board member.

UM: Left to right: Bill Venuti, Campbell Foundation Trustee; Dr. Dr. Mathias Lichtenheld, University of Miami; Ken Rapkin, Campbell Foundation Executive Director.

FAU: Left to right: Bill Venuti, Campbell Foundation Trustee; Dr. Massimo Caputi, Associate Professor of Biomedical Science, Florida Atlantic University's Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine; Ken Rapkin, Campbell Foundation Executive Director.

ABOUT THE CAMPBELL FOUNDATION

The Campbell Foundation was established in 1995 by the late Richard Campbell Zahn as a private, independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting clinical, laboratory-based research into the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. It focuses its funding on supporting alternative, nontraditional avenues of research. In its 21st year, the Campbell Foundation has given away \$10 million dollars, with about \$1 million going to direct services.