

VANCOUVER'S VACCINE CENTER GAINS NEW STRENGTHS

In June, 2006, the Vaccine Evaluation Center (VEC) in Vancouver was awarded a major infrastructure grant that will permit substantial enlargement of the unit. The multi-year award comes from the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research, British Columbia's premier research funding agency. Infrastructure support is rarely available in Canada and is most welcome, as it provides greater stability, breadth and creative potential for the VEC. The award favors training, leadership and excellence in vaccine science both locally and among collaborators across Canada.

The invigorated unit expands from 6 to 18 participating investigators, making it one of the largest academic vaccine units anywhere. The expansion effectively links the whole community of applied vaccinologists in Vancouver, including researchers in regional and provincial public health settings, pediatric and adult medicine, epidemiology and immunology. The objective is to better meet provincial and national needs for applied vaccine research through expanded local and national collaboration, greater use of advanced technology and active translation of new products into optimal immunization practice. Excellent training opportunities are available.

VEC investigators have proven expertise with studies in all age groups, including infants and children, adolescents, adults and seniors. Members include David Scheifele, Dave Speert, Simon Dobson, Jan Ochnio and Jack Forbes. They are joined by new members Tobi Kollmann (neonatal immunity and vaccines), Stuart Turvey (innate immunity), Jan Dutz (dermal immunity and topical immunization), Grant Stiver (adult immunization) and Janet McElhaney (elder immunization). Deborah Money brings new expertise in Obstetrics and Gynecology, timely for studies of HPV. Julie Bettinger PhD and Susan Wootton are specialists in infection epidemiology, involved in nationwide surveillance projects. Front-line public health physicians (Pat Daly, Reka Gustafson, Jim Salzman) provide a vital connection to public programs, as do colleagues at BC Centre for Disease Control (Monika Naus, others) who monitor provincial programs.

The new funds will aid planning and readiness activities and ensure smooth interactions among the participating investigators and with collaborators elsewhere. Center investigators will focus on national priorities, including preparations for pandemic influenza, establishment of HPV vaccination programs, and innovative studies of vaccine safety. Two over-arching themes are 1) support of public programs from initial epidemiologic rationale to final fine-tuning and 2) application of leading edge immunology to the evaluation of vaccines. Training is also a priority, at all levels.

The new funds create a larger, more capable organization able to conduct studies in any age groups and to respond to national priorities. This award provides added momentum for advancing the vaccine research agenda in Canada.