

\$25 million of aid for 'death valley'

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By Gillian Shaw

Premier Gordon Campbell brought a \$25-million gift to B.C.'s life sciences party.

The money, announced at LifeSciences B.C.'s annual awards dinner this week, will go to the Centre for Drug Research and Development, a Vancouver-based organization that helps researchers and fledgling biotechs get through the so-called "valley of death," that struggle between university discovery and the commercialization of new drugs and treatments.

"It's the critical funds we needed to let us get to the next level," said Natalie Dakers, chief executive officer of the CDRD. "The funding from the province truly allows us to execute our plans as we set out to do.

"It is \$25 million that goes to the operation of the centre, it allows us to hire the people and build the centre in a way we feel is necessary to achieve our goals.

"In our minds it is very much a green light for the centre."

The centre, with a lab currently under construction at the University of B.C., has raised almost \$50 million in a combination of grants and funding from a variety of sources including Victoria and Ottawa, the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research, the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and industry contributions.

The centre has already chalked up success stories.

Dr. Sandra Dunn, a scientist and assistant professor in the University of B.C.'s department of pediatrics, experimental medicine and medical genetics, points to the centre as the catalyst that moved forward her work on the discovery of a protein that cancer cells must have to survive.

By inhibiting that protein supply to the cancerous cell, the cancer can be destroyed, leaving healthy cells untouched. But Dunn's methodology for targeting the cancer cell wasn't working optimally and was proving a holdup.

Her request for a Canadian Institutes of Health Research proof-of-principle grant was turned down. In its review the CIHR said it didn't think the concept would work because it wouldn't be stable in patients.

Meeting the CIHR's concern and finding a way to deliver the protein inhibitor to the cancer target was proving a big stumbling block.

"Certainly getting to the next step was going to be a problem," said Dunn, who noted UBC's University-Industry Liaison Office has been instrumental in shepherding project from its beginning. When the project stalled, CDRD experts saved the day, helping Dunn to come up with a different method of delivery.

Dr. Marco Ciufolini, a professor in the department of chemistry at UBC and head of the division of drug design and synthesis at the CDRD, met with Dunn in a local coffee shop.

Hearing her problem, he promised he'd come up with a delivery method to get the drug to the cancer cell.

Ciufolini quickly delivered on his promise and six months after she was initially turned down by the CIHR, Dunn, in a co-application with Ciufolini and Dr. Martin Gleave, founder and chief scientific officer of OncoGenex Technologies and director of the Prostate Cancer Centre at the Jack Bell Research Laboratories, received a \$150,000 grant which includes \$15,000 for a patent application.

Demonstrating the merits of taking a discovery from the laboratory bench to the bedside takes money and also involves overcoming scientific obstacles can stall innovation.

That's where the CDRD comes in.

"To take that really high-risk jump you have to have a really compelling story," Dunn said. "The way the story became compelling and convincing was with the backing of CDRD."