

MCGRATH BEGALA

IN SUPPORT OF THE TEXAS HEART INSTITUTE STEM CELL CENTER

McGrath assisted then-State Senator Kyle Janek and legendary heart pioneer and surgeon Denton Cooley in preparing their 2005 joint op-ed piece advocating the creation of the Texas Heart Institute Stem Cell Center.

DENTON A. COOLEY, M.D., AND KYLE JANEK, M.D. | It was an accident of historic proportions which led Alexander Fleming to discover penicillin in 1928, and launch a golden era in medicine. Returning from a two-week vacation, the Scottish researcher noticed a yellow-green mold had accidentally contaminated a culture plate — and around this mold was a clear “halo” where the surrounding bacteria had been killed. After further study and observation, Fleming correctly deduced that the mold’s properties inhibited the growth of the bacteria.

“It was a discovery that would change the course of history,” Time Magazine noted in naming Fleming one of their 100 most important people of the 20th Century. “When it was finally recognized for what it was — the most efficacious life-saving drug in the world — penicillin would alter forever the treatment of bacterial infections.”

Tragically, few paid much attention to Fleming’s discovery until 1940. In fact, one short-sighted American university rejected an application for \$100 to investigate the drug, and even threatened to fire a professor who offered to pay for research out of his own pocket.

Today, we stand at the threshold of the next great era in medicine — thanks to the genome and molecular medicine — but we also face critical choices of embracing, or ignoring, revolutionary new treatments.

One of the most promising areas of genetics-based research today involves adult stem cells. Not to be confused with embryonic stem cell research, which is a hot-button issue, adult stem cells are derived from a grown person’s own adipose tissue, bone marrow, or other tissue.

For more than a decade, researchers at the Texas Heart Institute have set the pace for studying the use of adult stem cells to treat heart disease. Led by Drs. James T. Willerson, Emerson Perin, and others, our findings have led us to believe these cells can even be used to help “grow” heart muscle and blood tissue. The results have been so encouraging that, just last year, THI became the first institution to receive FDA approval to study the effects on 30 randomly chosen patients.

For all the progress and promise, however, Texas has reached a crossroads on adult stem cell research. We can either go the route of Fleming — and let our path-breaking findings languish needlessly in the lab room — or we can embrace this revolutionary treatment, maintain our global leadership position, and potentially help thousands of patients prevent and recover from heart disease.

While we believe no other medical research institution can match THI’s work with adult stem cells, other states across the country have started to invest more aggressively in research facilities. To capitalize on its unique leadership position and to accelerate our progress in the war against heart disease, THI is asking the State of Texas for \$41.1 million in tuition revenue-sharing to build an 80,000 square foot research space.

The stakes for our community, our state, and our nation are clear. Cardiovascular disease is America’s leading cause of death — claiming a life every 34 seconds, 2,600 lives each day, and more than one million

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lives each year. The estimated cost of cardiovascular disease in 2005 alone will be \$394 billion, or more than a billion dollars a day.

Make no mistake: The most effective way to combat this insidious destroyer is to strongly support and build on the research of institutions representing best practices in the struggle against heart disease. THI has already been setting the global pace, and the creation of the THI Stem Cell Center will build on this work by:

Focusing on adult stem cell research, so we can separate fact from fiction and avoid much of the controversy that has surrounded stem-cell research in other states.

Offering a home to the visionaries and scholars who will define the future of molecular medicine, so we can continue to nurture path-breaking research.

Developing strong research relationships among scientists across the state, supported by public and private funds.

Given the proper resources, THI believes we can develop therapies that repair an injured heart, brain or other organ. But to make this vision a reality, the State of Texas must step forward and take an active leadership role in adult stem cell research. If we do, we can hasten the day when human diseases are no longer a menacing threat to our lives.

This isn't 1928. The coming advances in modern medicine cannot be left to chance, just as we cannot afford to ignore revolutionary new treatments that can save lives.

Let's invest in our future. Let's build the Texas Heart Institute Stem Cell Center.

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