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Paul Allen Donates $9M for Edgy Neuroscience, Biotech Projects at MIT, Stanford, UW

Luke Timmerman 11/18/10

Paul Allen, the billionaire co-founder of Microsoft, has been investing in biotech companies and basic neuroscience for many years, and now he's set up a new program to put more money to work for scientists pushing the boundaries in those fields.

The Seattle-based Paul G. Allen Family Foundation is announcing today it is bankrolling seven research teams around the country with three-year grants worth a combined $9.4 million. This is the first round of grants for "Allen Distinguished Investigators" in what could become an ongoing program, according to Sue Coliton, a vice president at the foundation. The idea is that Allen will support cutting-edge research projects that haven't been able to secure traditional funding from the National Institutes of Health or the National Science Foundation, yet have great potential to advance science, and enable the development of new medical technologies and products, Coliton says.

"Paul is really interested in asking big open questions in science," Coliton says. "Our hope is these will lead to new knowledge in science that can be built on. We hope for breakthrough ideas, discoveries."

The inaugural batch of Allen investigators come from MIT, Stanford University, the University of Washington, Caltech, and the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. Much of the work they are doing reflects Allen's longstanding interest in neuroscience, which he has been supporting in a big way since he committed $100 million in 2003 to establish the Allen Institute for Brain Science in Seattle. But the grants being announced today stretch beyond neuroscience, and will also support development of new laboratory tools that could see broader use.

While Allen is best known as the co-founder of Microsoft and for making investments in technology companies (including a few high-profile flameouts like Charter Communications), fewer people realize he has a longstanding interest in life science investing too. Allen is well familiar with the high-risk, high-reward character of biotech, through his investments in a number of well-known companies, including Seattle-based **Dendreon** (NASDAQ: DNDN), **Seattle Genetics** (NASDAQ: SGEN), South San Francisco-based **Cytokinetics** (NASDAQ: CYTK), and Brisbane, CA-based BiPar Sciences (acquired a year ago by drug giant Sanofi-Aventis), to name a few. Last month, he bet another $20 million on Seattle-based Omeros (NASDAQ: OMER). Through getting to know biologists over the years, Allen has picked up the basics of what the NIH will pay for, what venture capitalists will support, and all kinds of interesting things that fall through the cracks.

"A year ago, I started searching for programs with potential for major breakthroughs but which had struggled to find funding through traditional sources," Allen said in a statement. "The inaugural Distinguished Investigators are working on some of the most exciting research in biology and neurology and I'm proud to be able to help keep that work going."

The Allen Distinguished Investigator program got started about a year ago, when Allen himself sent an e-mail around to a number of scientists he stays in touch with, says David Postman, a spokesman for Vulcan, Allen's investment company. Before long, the Allen Foundation put together a request for proposal, and got back 120 applications for projects to pick from. The foundation sought help from scientists to vet the projects, but Allen himself made the final decision on who got the grants, Coliton says.

Allen plans to keep tabs on the progress of the grant winners, and bring them together once a year to talk about their results, Coliton says. After about 12 to 18 months of seeing how the program works in practice, the foundation plans to take a closer look at whether the program will become an ongoing, enduring sort of thing. "It will evolve over the next couple of years," Coliton says.

With that, here are the seven original grant winners, with a thumbnail description of their work:

—**David Anderson**, Caltech, $1.6 million.

Anderson, one of the original advisors to the Allen Brain Institute, has secured funding to "localize, identify,

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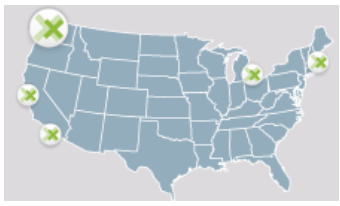

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characterize, and turn on" neurons in the mouse brain associated with attack and aggressive behavior.

—**Edward Boyden**, MIT Media Lab and McGovern Institute for Brain Research, $1.3 million.

Boyden's team will attempt to develop "new devices for creating real-time electrical maps of the brain in three dimensions," according to the foundation.

—**Michael Dickinson**, University of Washington, $2 million.

Dickinson plans to use the grant support "to develop new instruments to expand the body of knowledge in the field of measuring and quantifying complex group behavior in the relatively new field of study called "ethomics." I must admit that was a new "omics" to me; you can read more about it in this paper in *Nature*.

—**Christof Koch**, Caltech, $600,000.

Koch plans to look at neural networks that enable worms (C. elegans) to move.

—**Jennifer Nemhauser**, University of Washington, $1.4 million.

Nemhauser, according to the Allen Foundation, plans to "reverse engineer a cell-to-cell communication system from plants, construct a modular molecular **signal processing** toolbox for synthetic biology, and to use the toolbox to genetically engineer the single celled organism S. cerevisiae, to exhibit multi-celled behavior." S. cerevisiae is a form of yeast used in baking and brewing.

—**Mark Schnitzer**, Stanford University, $880,000.

Schnitzer, a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator, will seek to use his new money from Allen to "develop miniaturized, mass-producible, fluorescence microscopes that can create real-time imaging of neurons in the brain." If he can do that, the plan will be to look at what's going wrong at the neural and cellular level in schizophrenia.

—**Tony Zador**, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, $1.6 million.

Zador's lab will study "the use of viruses to transport bar-coded nucleotides across synapses and map the connectome of a living animal."

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