

Major Asthma Research Discovery Could Lead to New Drugs Findings Licensed to Biotechnology Firm

SAN FRANCISCO, California, March 18, 2009: The American Asthma Foundation announced that a significant research discovery they funded has been licensed by a leading biotech company. This move could lead to potential new drugs for treating asthma by blocking certain cell interactions that produce lung inflammation and constrict airways. The studies leading to these findings were conducted by Michael Croft, Ph.D. at the La Jolla Institute for Allergy & Immunology in La Jolla, California, a non-profit biomedical research institute and international leader in immunology research.

Dean Smith, Executive Director of the American Asthma Foundation, said, “The reality of scientific research is that it often takes several decades for a so-called ‘discovery at the bench’ to become an approved product or treatment. There are many, many steps along the way including understanding the underlying science, translating the science to a new drug or therapy, conducting animal and human studies, and progressing through medical approval processes. We are excited that Dr. Croft’s research finding has now moved to the next phase where its use in potential new drugs to treat asthma can be further explored.”



Michael Croft, Ph.D.

Discussing the role of the American Asthma Foundation in improving treatment, preventing, and finding a cure for asthma, Ms. Marion O. Sandler, chairman of the Foundation’s board, points out, “The American Asthma Foundation is the only national advocacy group in the United States devoted solely to asthma. Sad to say, there is no cure for asthma and little progress has been made in 50 years in improving treatment. Dr. Croft’s discovery is very significant, not only because of the great need to develop new treatments for asthma but also because of the long lead time and complexity involved in bringing new therapies to market.”

In 2000, Dr. Croft received a three-year early excellence award from the American Asthma Foundation. He and his team focus on the roles that certain proteins play in the ability of the immune system to guard the body against harmful microorganisms. Dr. Croft’s research demonstrated that use of an antibody to block the interaction of these proteins in experimental animal models can substantially reduce the lung inflammation and airway blockage that are symptomatic of asthma attacks. The licensing of this finding is the next step in developing a drug treatment.

Discussing the role of the American Asthma Foundation in funding basic research, Ms. Sandler explains, “The American Asthma Foundation underwrites a national grants program to attract the best scientific minds to address the asthma problem. Specifically, the American Asthma Foundation supports highly original, cutting-edge asthma research by providing generous multi-year awards to scientists not previously involved in the study of asthma.” She notes, “Because of the time it takes for ground-breaking research approaches to result in improved therapies, it is imperative that we continue to solicit and fund new ideas so that there is a constant flow of innovative thought applied to arresting this disease.”

Asthma is a chronic, complex disease that is a major public health problem. Nearly one in every 13 people in the United States has asthma -- more Americans than have coronary heart disease or cancer or Parkinson’s Disease. Asthma is the most serious chronic disease of childhood and disproportionately strikes the poor.

Over the past nine years, the American Asthma Foundation has awarded almost \$60 million to 110 outstanding researchers. These United States and Canadian scientists have been drawn from a wide range of fields including biology, epidemiology, medicine, pathology, and pharmacology. Citing the impact of the American Asthma Foundation’s awards, Mr. Smith comments that “American Asthma Foundation grants have generated over \$35 million in new funds from other sources for further asthma research.” Recently, the American Asthma Foundation has expanded recruiting efforts to major universities in Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden.

Detailing the positive outcomes achieved by American Asthma Foundation-funded investigators, Ms. Sandler notes, “To date, American Asthma Foundation awards have resulted in eleven promising breakthroughs, or new ‘pathways,’ that have led to support from the pharmaceutical industry. Three of these breakthroughs have progressed to clinical trials, which is encouraging in view of the very long timetable involved in translating research to new therapies.” Mr. Smith also observes, “American Asthma Foundation-funded investigators have published over 200 papers in peer-reviewed scientific journals, thereby helping to more broadly distribute the knowledge gained through research sponsored by the program.”

Mr. Smith concludes, “Members of the public can partner with the American Asthma Foundation in supporting research such as Dr. Croft’s by making a donation at the American Asthma Foundation’s website, www.americanasthma.org.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

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