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PLGA Foundation gift seeks to overcome research bottlenecks

When the PLGA Foundation helped found Dana-Farber's Pediatric Low-Grade Astrocytoma (PLGA) program in 2007, it became a true driving force in the search for pediatric brain cancer causes and treatments. Three years later, the foundation continues to provide generous funding while actively championing this innovative program.

"We made an ongoing commitment to Dana-Farber," said PLGA Foundation President AJ Janower, "to not only support the PLGA program but also act as a catalyst in the discovery process." Breaking new scientific ground was exactly what the PLGA Foundation had in mind with its recent grants totaling \$744,000.

This support was spurred by a recent meeting between PLGA Foundation representatives and Charles Stiles, PhD, co-director of the PLGA Research Program and co-chair of the Department of Cancer Biology at Dana-Farber, to identify problem areas holding up PLGA research.

"DFCI has been incredibly productive with the funds we provide, but we learned that there were certain bottlenecks preventing progress," said Janower. In Stiles' opinion, the program needed to add three new research cores to its growing portfolio of discovery platforms in order to yield additional, major advances. Thus, \$494,000 of the gift will help establish two new research cores devoted to finding druggable genetic targets in tumor cells, and a third core devoted to in vivo drug testing in mouse models.

In addition, the PLGA Foundation gave \$250,000 to support the comprehensive genetic analysis of the grade II astrocytomas now being conducted by Rameen Beroukhi, MD, PhD, and Keith Ligon, MD, PhD, of DFCI's medical oncology department.

"Research progress has been stymied by the relative low incidence of fibrillary astrocytomas and the scarcity of high-quality tissue samples," says PLGA Board Member and parent Ken Gainey. "This project aims to identify new genetic abnormalities that can be validated against archived samples." Beroukhi and Ligon hypothesize that by deep-sequencing the DNA of grade II tumors, they will be able to specify the mutations that lead to the disease.

"Pediatric astrocytomas have, by and large, escaped the attention of the biomedical research community," said Stiles. "The current lack of government-sponsored research has led to a lack of mouse models and clinical tissue samples. In order to understand pediatric astrocytomas, we have to break through these problem areas. The continued support and commitment of the PLGA Foundation is crucial to the development of new, lifesaving therapies." ■

