

Press Release

HKU – SCI Fund Global Advancement in the Treatment of Spinal Cord Injury

ChinaSCINet and the First International Spinal Cord Injury Treatment and Trials

To foster advancement in SCI combination therapies, the China Spinal Cord Injury Network (ChinaSCINet), supported by the HKU-SCI Fund, was established by The University of Hong Kong and the Rutgers University of the US.

By the end of 2005, a total of 17 SCI treatment centres in China will participate in the Network, and by the end of 2006 some 2,500 people with SCI in China are expected to participate in a large scale clinical trial on combination therapies for SCI. The ChinaSCINet will hold the First International Spinal Cord Injury Treatment and Trials from December 17 to 20, 2005, to identify the most promising and feasible SCI therapies for clinical trial in China.

Global Advancement in the Treatment of Spinal Cord Injury

Spinal cord injury (SCI) can lead to severe disabilities, e.g. loss of motion and sensation, bladder and bowel dysfunction, etc. SCI has long been considered to be irreversible. Recent studies, however, suggest that combination therapies are better than individual therapies, and open new hope to SCI treatment. To foster advancement in SCI treatment, the China Spinal Cord Injury Network (ChinaSCINet) will carry out large clinical trials to assess the effectiveness of combination therapies.

Treatment of SCI must address several major obstacles to re-growing spinal connections. These obstacles include:

- (1) Nerve fibres (axons) must cross the injury site which is often bereft of cell adhesion molecules and other signals that guide nerve cell growth.
- (2) Nerve cells must grow for long periods in order to achieve reconnection.
- (3) The spinal cord contains several factors that inhibit the growth of nerve cells. Multiple treatments are therefore needed to address each of these obstacles.

Despite the general impression that recovery of SCI is difficult if not impossible, over hundred treatments have been reported to improve recovery or functional recovery in animals after spinal CSI. These include transplants of cells to bridge the spinal cord injury site, growth factors to stimulate nerve fibers to regenerate, and drugs to block inhibitory factors in the spinal cord.

Recent studies suggest that combination therapies are better than individual therapies. For example, a team of researchers lead by **Prof Wise Young, Co-Director, Advisory Board, HKU Spinal Cord Injury Fund and Professor, Rutgers University** and **Prof So Kwok-fai, Co-Director, Advisory Board, HKU Spinal Cord Injury Fund and Head of the**

Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, HKU, last year found that the combination of lithium and chondroitinase, two therapies that address specific obstacles to regeneration, work synergistically to produce better recovery of function in animals than either therapy alone.

“The ChinaSCINet offers a unique opportunity for China and the world. For China, it is the opportunity to develop effective therapies for SCI, a condition long regarded to be incurable and that affects over a million Chinese. For the world, ChinaSCINet represents hope for over three million families with members suffering from SCI,” said **Prof Young**.

Prof Li Jianjun, Executive Director of China Rehabilitation Research pointed out that not only persons with SCI, but also their families are suffering. “There is no uniform standard for diagnosis or treatment of SCI in China. Also no single centre has the credibility to convince all doctors in China and around the world that a therapy is safe and effective. The ChinaSCINet will be able to play this important role,” said Prof Li. “SCI requires lifetime care and treatments, restoring function is not only beneficial to the patient but the family and government as well.”

“The University of Hong Kong is proud to be the organiser of the ChinaSCINet, which will bring the most promising therapies to clinical trials for SCI in China,” said **Prof So**. He asserts that “our goal is to ensure that the ChinaSCINet clinical trials meet the highest clinical trial standards both for China and the world.”

Pledge for Community Support

The ChinaSCINet is supported by the HKU-SCI Fund. Donations to the Fund are most welcomed. Cheques can be made payable to “HKU – SCI Fund” and mail to the HKU Spinal Cord Injury Fund, Clinical Trials Centre, Faculty of Medicine, The University of Hong Kong, 8/F, Clinical Pathology Building, Queen Mary Hospital, Hong Kong. Please call 2855- 4674 for enquiries.

Please visit the website at <http://www.hku.hk/facmed/press/> for press photos and supplementary information.

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