



**PRESS RELEASE**

## **Spinal Cord Injury in China and Hong Kong & Establishment of HKU – SCI Fund**

Spinal cord injury (SCI) can lead to physical difficulties of different levels to the patients, e.g. loss of motion and sensation, bladder and bowel dysfunction etc.. In the US, about 10,000 cases were found annually. According to information provided by the Department of Health, 452 patients with this injury were recorded in Hong Kong in 2000.

SCI has long been considered to be irreversible. For much of human history, doctors have told patients and families with SCI that they should not hope for therapies that will restore function. In the past decade, this has changed. Many animal studies have shown that the spinal cord can regenerate. Dozens of therapies have now been reported to improve recovery in animals and some are being tried in humans. However, few of these treatments have been tested in clinical trial.

**Professor Keith Dip-kei Luk**, Head and Chair Professor of the Department of Orthopaedic and Traumatology, Faculty of Medicine, HKU explained that spinal cord impairment is commonly caused by traumatic injuries such as industrial or car accidents, violence or sports injuries. Spinal cord injury can lead to various clinical problems including physical, psychological and socio-economical problems to the patients. Professor Luk said: *“The objectives of conventional management of spinal cord injury are to maximize the residual functions and minimize disabilities. However, regeneration of the spinal cord is not considered possible. Yet, recent advancement on the clinical trials in animals indicates that regenerative therapies grant the potential for spinal cord to regenerate after injuries.”*

**Professor Kwok-fai So**, Head of the Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, HKU introduced a number of ground-breaking researches aimed to regenerate the spinal cord, these include: (i) reduce cell death by therapy with methylprednisolone and replace death cells with Olfactory Ensheathing Cells (OEC) transplantation or stem cells transplantation; (ii) enhancing regeneration ability of axotomised neurons and rebuild myelination by Schwann’s cell transplantation and (iv) reduce glial scar and remove inhibitor molecules by changing the local chemical environment.

As clinical trials in spinal cord injury have not proceeded to the human trial stage, **Professor Johan Petter Einar Karlberg**, Director of the Clinical Trials Centre, Faculty of Medicine, HKU introduced the exciting opportunity that how clinical trial in the field could be carried out in the near future as well as standardization of all related procedures.

Cooperating with Faculty of Medicine, HKU, **Professor Wise Young** from the Rutgers University said China is taking the leadership in bringing spinal cord injury therapies to clinical trial by establishing the China Spinal Cord Injury Network (China SCI Network). China SCI Network will accelerate development and availability of therapies that improve function in people with spinal cord injury all over the world. The Network will initially have six nodes: Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Xi'an, and Zhengzhou. All the centers would have investigators committed to developing spinal cord injury therapies.

A “HKU-SCI Fund” will be established to support the works of China SCI Network and Faculty of Medicine, HKU.

Donation can be made by cheques and sent to “HKU – SCI Fund”.

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The Faculty of Medicine, HKU and the China SCI Network plan to host the first Annual International Symposium on Spinal Cord Injury Clinical trials and Therapies in Hong Kong, tentatively scheduled in October 2005. This symposium will showcase the achievements of clinical trials in China. Over 1,000 clinicians and scientists, families with SCI patients, pharmaceutical and biotechnology industry, foundations and government agencies will be invited to join.

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

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September 16, 2004