

UCSD Receives \$2.5 Million Gift for Celiac Disease Research Center

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Thanks to a \$2.5 million gift from the Oklahoma-based William K. Warren Foundation, researchers at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine will be able to step up the fight against celiac disease, a disease estimated to affect one in 100 Americans. Celiac disease is a digestive condition triggered by consumption of a common protein called gluten, which is found in bread, pasta, cookies, pizza crust and many other foods.

“A change in diet is the only treatment at the moment,” said Martin F. Kagnoff, M.D., UCSD Professor of Medicine and one of the country’s recognized leaders in Celiac Disease research. “This generous gift will enable us to support funding for new investigators and innovative research in the field of celiac disease, with the ultimate goal of developing new approaches to diagnose and treat this disease.”

The grant – \$500,000 a year for the next five years – will enable Kagnoff and his colleagues to establish the William K. Warren Medical Research Center for Celiac Disease. The center will comprise research in celiac disease being conducted by several investigators at UCSD. Future plans also include developing a clinic at San Diego Children’s Hospital and Health Center, San Diego, planned for early 2006 and, ultimately, an adult celiac disease clinic at UCSD. The funding will support basic and translational research programs for a disease that often goes undiagnosed in patients.

“Symptoms of celiac disease might include unexplained anemia, irritability, depression, weight loss, vitamin deficiency and early-onset osteoporosis,” Kagnoff said. “Only about 10% of patients have what might be considered typical symptoms. We have a huge educational job with primary-care physicians to recognize and treat the disease.”

William K. Warren, Jr., is Chairman Emeritus and Vice President of Research of the private family foundation which supports Saint Francis Health System in eastern Oklahoma, comprised of five non-profit hospitals, the 215-physician member Warren Clinic and a senior-living facility in his hometown of Tulsa. He also has a tie to the San Diego community, as he and his wife own a home in La Jolla.

“In talking with our doctors at the Warren Clinic, I learned about this insidious disease that affects people of all ages. I’ve searched the country to find the very best researcher in celiac disease, and that is how I became acquainted with Dr. Kagnoff,” said Warren.

Celiac disease is a genetic autoimmune intestinal disorder in which the patient’s small intestine is damaged from a toxic reaction to the ingestion of gluten, interfering with the body’s ability to absorb nutrients. The disease is unique in that a specific food component has been identified as the trigger. Gluten is the common name for proteins found in many cereal grains – such as wheat, rye and barley – which are harmful to persons with the disease. Patients must make often drastic changes to their diet, as gluten is used as fillers and binders in many manufactured foods. In addition to bread, crackers and pasta, hidden gluten can be found in some unlikely foods such as cold cuts, soups, hard candies, soy sauce, and many low or non-fat products.

“I’ve seen the struggle involved in trying to maintain a gluten-free diet,” Warren said. “Especially with young people, who have their whole lives ahead of them, it’s very annoying to them when they can’t eat the same foods as their friends. It’s just one more handicap to those suffering from celiac disease.”

“There has been a remarkable increase in this country over the last several years in the number of patients found to have celiac disease,” said Kagnoff. “Our hope is to develop new drug targets to treat those patients.”

In addition to the children’s clinic, Kagnoff and his associates are planning a scientific symposium on celiac disease and a clinical symposium for community pediatricians in February 2006.

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