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£1m for new collaborative research projects at UCL, UCLH, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and Moorfields Eye Hospital

Teams of health scientists from UCL and three partner Hospital Trusts across London are joining forces to develop research and ground-breaking treatments for patients with a range of debilitating conditions.

Biomedical specialists will pool their expertise to focus on five new areas of research using innovative methods, including advanced genetic screening. They aim to improve techniques for diagnosing a genetic heart condition which is a common cause of sudden death in young people, develop gene therapy for a currently incurable blinding disease and improve mortality rates for organ transplant patients who develop complications.

Funding and expertise for the projects comes from the National Institute for Health Research Biomedical Research Centres (BRCs) at,

- University College London/ University College London Hospitals (UCL/UCLH)
- UCL Institute of Ophthalmology/Moorfields Eye Hospital (IO/MEH)
- UCL Institute of Child Health / Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children (ICH/GOSH).

Each of the above centres contributed to the £1 million budget that will fund the five research projects selected by a stringent internal and external peer-review process.

This recent initiative is an example of how increasing collaboration is driving forward the biomedical research agenda and follows from the establishment last year of “UCL Partners”. UCL Partners comprises University College London (UCL), University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust, Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust. It has recently applied to the Department of Health for official status as an Academic Health Science Centre (AHSC). A decision is likely to be announced in March.

Professor Ian Jacobs, Director UCLH/UCL Comprehensive Biomedical Centre said: “UCL Partners formally brings together researchers with specialist knowledge from across London to create a research powerhouse. This collaboration enables them to work together on exciting, high quality research projects that will ultimately benefit patients. It is a relationship that we will develop even further in the future.”

The key aims of the five research studies that will be funded by the BRCs are:

- To improve survival rates of patients developing major complications following organ transplants. Immunosuppressive drugs used to prevent organ rejection can affect certain cell responses leading to post-transplant lymphoproliferative disorder (PTLD) and current therapies are often ineffective. This study will provide the scientific basis for clinical studies to improve survival rates for these patients. (GOSH, UCLH, UCL).
- To investigate two distinct developmental problems, using MRI scanning, which could underlie congenital nerve palsy and eye misalignment. (UCLH, GOSH, MEH, UCL).
- To develop further understanding of the genetic basis for individuals developing hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a heart muscle disorder which occurs in 1 in 500 individuals and is a common cause of sudden death in young people. This study will systematically evaluate and follow an adult population using advanced genetic screening technologies with the aim of providing a cost-effective screening programme for this and other inherited cardiovascular diseases. (UCLH, GOSH, UCL).
- To identify new genes responsible for neurological conditions and thence to develop new treatments to combat them. (UCLH, GOSH, MEH, UCL).
- To develop new gene-therapy treatment for Usher Syndrome, a genetic disorder affecting the retina that can lead to blindness. The study also aims to introduce an efficient laboratory test to diagnose those patients at risk of developing the disorder. (GOSH, MEH, UCL).

Notes to editors

1. For further information, please visit the UCL Partners website at www.uclpartners.com or contact Neil Goodwin, Project Director, UCL Partners, on +44 (0)7831 886 834 or at neil.goodwin@uclh.nhs.uk
2. The establishment of Academic Health Science Centres was one of the major reforms recommended in Health Minister Professor Lord Darzi's review, 'Healthcare for London: a framework for action', published in July 2007 by NHS London. It sets out how London needs to change in order to meet Londoners' health needs over the next ten years. More recently, Lord Darzi reaffirmed the importance of Academic Health Science Centres as a central plank of NHS reform in his 'NHS Next Stage Review Final Report - High Quality Care for All', published on 30 June 2008. The report recognizes that "the potential of AHSCs to deliver research excellence and improve patient care and professional education is tremendous."
3. As measured by citations in academic publications monitored by the independent ISI Essential Science Indicators service, UCL and its partners are world-class in a number of fields:
 - Neuroscience - top in Europe and 2nd in the world
 - Clinical Medicine - top in Europe

- Immunology - second in Europe
- UCL is the most highly cited University in the UK overall.