Stand Up act

By Tim Fulmer, Senior Writer

In awarding a total of \$73.6 million to 5 teams of cancer researchers, not-for-profit **Stand Up To Cancer** was agnostic to specific therapeutic areas and instead focused on picking projects with the potential to enter the clinic within 3 years.

The funding model employed by the entertainment industry-sponsored charity—providing three years of support with annual milestones—more closely resembles that of a venture firm than a government grant. Indeed, the average grant size of \$14.7 million is almost on par with the \$16.8 million average series A round for biotechs over the last five years, as tracked by *BioCentury*.

Stand Up To Cancer has enlisted the **American Association for Cancer Research** (AACR) to distribute the funds and evaluate each research team's progress. The selection of teams began last July when the AACR issued a request for ideas for translational cancer research projects. A 20-member scientific advisory committee assembled by AACR reviewed proposals from 237 groups, eventually recommending 5 (see **Table 1, "Stand Up To Cancer awards"**).

"The committee awarded the five research proposals that best hit the sweet spot of not being too preclinical on the one hand, and not having already made it into the clinic on the other," said committee

member Raymond DuBois, who is provost and EVP of **The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center**.

A key criterion guiding the selection of teams was sufficient expertise and experience in a given area to ensure that the new proposal stood a strong chance of entering the clinic by the third funding year if not sooner, he noted.

Another requirement of the grants was that each of the five research groups must consist of scientists drawn from multiple institutions and academic disciplines who have not previously worked together.

"By joining groups with complementary expertise who might not otherwise collaborate, the Stand Up To Cancer initiative hopes to accelerate translational cancer research," said AACR spokesman Jeremy Moore.

The groups will be required to meet with members of the advisory committee every 6–12 months to evaluate their progress and discuss potential roadblocks. Each team also will have to meet a number of prespecified research milestones, with teams held accountable if those milestones are not met. The financial terms of accountability would be worked out by the advisory committee on a case-by-case basis, Moore told *SciBX*.

Although the AACR declined to disclose the milestones, the leader of one of the teams, Daniel Haber, told *SciBX* that he and colleagues are expected "to optimize the technology over the first year, roll it out to our collaborating institutions in year two and initiate collaborative clinical trials in year three."

Haber is a professor of medicine at the **Harvard Medical School** and director of the **Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center**. His project is focused on developing a chip technology for detecting circulating tumor cells that could be used in cancer trials.

Table 1. Stand Up To Cancer awards. The charity will pay out \$73.6 million over 3 years to 5 groups of cancer researchers.

Team leaders	Research focus	Grant (\$M)
Craig Thompson, Abramson Cancer Center of the University of Pennsylvania ; Daniel Von Hoff, The Translational Genomics Research Institute	Use advanced imaging techniques to determine what nutrients pancreatic cancer cells require for growth and survival and run clinical trials designed to deprive pancreatic tumors of crucial nutrients in combination with standard chemotherapy	18.0
Joe Gray, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory ; Dennis Slamon, University of California, Los Angeles	Develop therapies for the three major subtypes of breast cancer and design a discovery platform for identifying and validating new molecular targets and breast cancer drug combinations	16.5
Lewis Cantley, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center ; Charles Sawyers, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center ; Gordon Mills, The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center	Use biomarkers and imaging techniques to identify breast, ovarian and endometrial cancer patients who could benefit from phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K) inhibitors and develop therapeutic combinations that hit multiple targets in cellular pathways that contribute to tumor growth	15.0
Daniel Haber, Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center ; Mehmet Toner, Harvard Medical School	Optimize chip technology for detecting circulating tumor cells in a large-scale clinical setting and conduct clinical trials to assess the chip's ability to detect early cancers and monitor tumor treatment response	15.0
Stephen Baylin, The Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center ; Peter Jones, University of Southern California	Identify biomarkers that can predict and monitor the efficacy of epigenetic cancer therapies, develop therapies that target cancer stem cells and design a clinical trial to test the efficacy of a second-generation epigenetic anticancer compound	9.1
Total		73.6

Stand Up To Cancer raised the majority of its funds last September via a telethon that yielded \$104 million in donations. The 5 research teams will receive about 70% of that sum.

This year, the charity hopes to issue about \$9 million in a second round of grants that will provide up to \$750,000 over a 3-year period to scientists who are early in their careers and whose research has translational potential.

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COMPANIES AND INSTITUTIONS MENTIONED

American Association for Cancer Research, Philadelphia, Pa.

Harvard Medical School, Boston, Mass.

Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center, Boston, Mass.

Stand Up To Cancer, Los Angeles, Calif.

The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, Texas