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Increased funding strengthens Life Raft Group's five-year plan to find cure for gastrointestinal stromal tumors (GIST)

Life Raft Group (LRG), the prominent patient-based organization dedicated to ensuring the survival and well-being of patients and families living with a deadly cancer called gastrointestinal stromal tumors (GIST), today presented \$360,000 in research awards to Dr. Christopher Corless and Dr. Michael Heinrich of Oregon Health & Science University Cancer Institute and Portland VA Medical Center.

(Media-NewsWire.com) - Life Raft Group (LRG), the prominent patient-based organization dedicated to ensuring the survival and well-being of patients and families living with a deadly cancer called gastrointestinal stromal tumors (GIST), today presented \$360,000 in research awards to Dr. Christopher Corless and Dr. Michael Heinrich of Oregon Health & Science University Cancer Institute and Portland VA Medical Center. Building upon the success of the first two years of its Pathway to a Cure research program, LRG has committed an additional two million dollars in research funds to ten of the world's leading GIST experts over the next two years to find a cure for GIST.

"It's an honor to work alongside my fellow researchers in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation," said Dr. Christopher Corless. "We all share LRG's goal to find a cure and thanks to this organization's funding and support, we are seeing dramatic progress every day," added Dr. Michael Heinrich.

Michael Heinrich, M.D., is a professor of medicine at Oregon Health & Science University Cancer Institute, division of hematology and medical oncology. He is the interim co-division chief of hematology and medical oncology; section chief, hematology oncology at the Portland Veterans Affairs and hematology/medical oncology service staff physician, Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Heinrich's primary research interest is in the development of novel tyrosine kinase inhibitors for treatment of human cancers. Dr. Heinrich's research includes both pre-clinical identification of novel molecular targets and testing of new agents in the laboratory and the clinic.

Christopher Corless, M.D., Ph.D., is vice chair for research and professor of pathology at Oregon Health & Science University. In addition to serving as Director of the Cancer Pathology Shared Resource for the OHSU Cancer Institute, Dr. Corless pursues research on immunohistochemical and molecular testing to novel therapeutic targets.

Each year, 5,000-10,000 people in the U.S are diagnosed with GIST, a rare and often deadly sarcoma, for which there is no known cure. "The end game is to find a cure for this disease and it is our responsibility as a group to see that this is achieved," said Jerry Knapp, LRG Board Member and GIST patient. "It must be us—because our lives are at risk and we must take ownership of our survival."

Life Raft Group is working together with innovative organizations such as FasterCures (www.fastercures.org), and other non-profit organizations that fund and conduct cutting-edge research, to support each other's efforts to produce better and faster results. The goal is to shorten the time from "bench-to-bedside" by funding targeted research that has the highest probability of identifying new treatments and finding a cure.

"Our GIST research approach represents a new direction among disease-focused organizations to find cures by becoming actively involved in the research process," said Jerry Cudzil, President of LRG's Board of Directors.

LRG'S INNOVATIVE RESEARCH MODEL

Pathway to a Cure began in 2005 with the planning of a five-year strategic plan to identify priority projects needed to overcome resistance to first-line chemotherapy treatments. Life Raft Group brought together a core group of leading GIST researchers and introduced cooperation, coordination and accountability as key building blocks of their historic effort.

The group created a grants structure designed to give maximum support to this research effort, including putting a cap on administrative overhead (from an industry norm of 75% to 10%). Life Raft Group also asked each of its investigators to assume a cross-cutting responsibility for coordinating and reporting on key priority areas. The group created adult and pediatric GIST tissue banks to support this research process.

Life Raft Group is funding the world's most-renowned GIST experts and is awarding each of the research scientists a multi-year grant from a pool of two million dollars. Joining Drs. Corless and Heinrich as second-time grant recipients are: Dr. Cristina Antonescu and Dr. Peter Besmer, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center; Dr. Jonathan Fletcher, Brigham & Women's Hospital; Dr. Maria Debiec-Rychter, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium; Dr. Matt van de Rijn, Stanford University Medical Center; Dr. Brian Rubin, The Cleveland Clinic. Life Raft Group is also awarding two new researchers multi-year grants: Dr. Anette Duensing, University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute and Dr. Sebastian Bauer, West German Cancer Center, University of Essen, Germany.

"Pathway to a Cure embodies the best of all possible worlds: brilliant scientists and a committed patient-community working side-by-side

to cure cancer," affirms Norman Scherzer, Life Raft Group's Executive Director. "It's a new world where patients not only have a seat at the decision-making table; they have it within their power to be the driving force. With each new success, LRG is strengthening its resolve to find a cure and to raise the funds needed to do so."

About the Life Raft Group

Since its founding in 2002, the LRG has served as a beacon for GIST patients and their families. The LRG focuses on four major program areas: Research, Information and Support, Patient Outreach and Assistance and Advocacy. Each year the LRG reaches a network of over 60,000 people in over 50 countries through its online community, newsletters, websites, webcasts, supports groups and educational materials. The goal is to reach and educate as many patients and doctors as possible to create a world where all GIST patients are treated with expert care. The LRG is committed to finding a cure for GIST and is the largest private funder of GIST research.

About GIST

GISTs belong to a group of rare cancers called soft tissue sarcomas that can occur in connective tissues, bones, muscles, fat, nerves, blood vessels, and cartilage. About 40-70% of GISTs originate in the stomach, 20-40% in the small intestine, and 5-15% in the colon and rectum. In 2000 scientists discovered a way to properly diagnose GISTs by testing for a mutation in the C-Kit gene. That same year the introduction of Gleevec® (imatinib mesylate), a molecularly targeted drug specific to the C-Kit gene resulted in an 85% response by GIST patients who had previously had few effective treatment options. With patients now developing resistance to Gleevec® LRG is racing against the drug resistance clock to find new treatments to save their lives.

About the OHSU Cancer Institute

The OHSU Cancer Institute is the only National Cancer Institute-designated center between Sacramento and Seattle. It comprises some 200 clinical researchers, basic scientists and population scientists who work together to translate scientific discoveries into longer and better lives for Oregon's cancer patients. In the lab, basic scientists examine cancer cells and normal cells to uncover molecular abnormalities that cause the disease. This basic science informs more than 300 clinical trials conducted at the OHSU Cancer Institute.

About Portland VA Medical Center

The Portland VA Medical Center (PVAMC) provides quality primary and specialty medical care to more than 60,000 veterans and is the leading VA research institution for the state of Oregon and one of the largest VA research centers nationally. The program has 110 funded investigators. PVAMC has received a number of large grants to establish centers dedicated to the fight against important diseases. These include the Alcohol Research Center, the Northwest Veterans Affairs Cancer Research Center, National Center for Rehabilitative Auditory Research, Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center, Parkinson's Disease Research, Education & Clinical Center, the Mood Disorders Center, Methamphetamine Abuse Research Center, Center for Study of Chronic Co-Morbid Mental and Physical Disorders, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Decision Science Center, and Research Enhancement Award Programs in Multiple Sclerosis, Hepatitis C and Health Services Research.



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