

Joining Forces to Combat Multiple Myeloma

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After years of working toward the same goal as rivals, four leading cancer centers are linking efforts to fight a deadly bone disease. Their strategy – to coordinate clinical trials, share resources and pool their findings on multiple myeloma – could hasten drug discoveries and reshape the way institutions conduct research on other diseases.



The plan, a rare break from tradition for competing academic centers, is designed to focus attention and funding on multiple myeloma, a blood cancer that erodes the bones and kills quickly. About 46,000 Americans have the disease, though they make up only a small portion of the total cancer population. As a result, experts say, research is limited and drug companies are slow to develop treatments.

But four centers – including the Mayo Clinic and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston – hope that combining their efforts will give a push toward identifying new therapies and help make up for a lack of funding. They announced their partnership this week: the Multiple Myeloma Research Consortium.

"Our overriding goal is to move drugs more rapidly from the laboratory to the bedside because the need is urgent," said Dr. Kenneth Anderson, an oncologist at the Dana Farber institute and a member of the consortium's board of directors. "This will allow a new level of collaboration, between academic centers and pharmaceuticals, which will help move things forward."

Bringing together institutions that often feud over grants and scientists is no small feat. Getting the project off the ground took years of financial and legal planning, all led by Kathy Giusti, a pharmaceutical executive who learned she had multiple myeloma eight years ago.

At the time, she had barely heard of the disease. After some quick research, she discovered that few treatments were available because myeloma is an "orphan cancer," one of many rare diseases the pharmaceutical industry tends to overlook. Myeloma patients account for only 1 percent of the total cancer population, but their survival rates are among the lowest.

A graduate of Harvard Business School with experience in marketing, Mrs. Giusti set up a foundation that raised \$29 million for myeloma research in the last five years. But she decided she had to do more. Even with more funding, progress was slow because researchers studying the disease rarely communicated, often duplicating each other's findings and hitting dead ends.

"A lot of researchers just didn't have the time to tell each other, 'Hey, here's what I learned; you're headed down the wrong path,'" Mrs. Giusti said.

Putting her business background to work, she pulled together a team of lawyers, a consulting firm and four of the top cancer centers in North America – Dana Farber, the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute in Tampa, Fla., and the Ontario Cancer Institute.

"We all believed that this would be the best way to accelerate the 'search for a cure,'" said Dr. Rafael Fonseca, an associate professor of medicine at the Mayo Graduate School of Medicine who is involved with the project.

The team plowed through intellectual property conflicts and signed a contract to work together, a process that cost more than a quarter of a million dollars in legal and consulting fees, Mrs. Giusti said. They set up a centralized tissue bank to ensure that the institutions would all (use the same samples in their studies of potential treatments. They came up with a plan to coordinate their clinical trials, following a standardized set of procedures. And they recruited I.B.M. and First Genetic Trust to customize their technology.

"What's really unique is that they got the investigators, business folks and the scientists to decide on their goals and milestones together," said Dr. Ellen Feigal, an oncologist and former head of the division of cancer treatment and diagnosis at the National Cancer Institute who is familiar with the consortium. "That makes them more attractive to pharmaceutical companies that may not have been interested in working in this area before."