

IMMUNOCORE Receives \$100,000 Grand Challenges Explorations Grant for Innovative Global Health Research

Immuncore announced today that it has received a US\$100,000 Grand Challenges Explorations grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The grant will support an innovative global health research project conducted by Dr. Bent Jakobsen, Chief Scientific Officer, titled “curing HIV through elimination of latently infected cells”.

Dr. Jakobsen’s project is one of 65 grants announced by the Gates Foundation in the fifth funding round of [Grand Challenges Explorations](#), an initiative to help scientists around the world explore bold and largely unproven ways to improve health in developing countries. The grants were provided to scientists in 16 countries on 5 continents.

To receive funding, Bent Jakobsen showed in a two-page application how his idea falls outside current scientific paradigms and might lead to significant advances in global health. The initiative is highly competitive, receiving more than 2,400 proposals in this round.

HIV is an incurable, chronic disease. Although a plethora of anti-viral drugs exists which allow patients, with access to them, to manage their disease, there is currently no cure. During anti-viral therapy the HIV virus persists in a latent state in a small reservoir of long-lived cells and will flare up if the anti-viral treatment is stopped. This project will test the ability of a brand new class of biologic drug, an ImmTAC, to clear the virus from latently-infected cells, potentially yielding a cure. Patients would undergo a short course of intensive treatment to cure HIV, replacing the need for a lifetime of taking drugs.

Immuncore has engineered a high-affinity T cell receptor (TCR) that recognizes and binds an antigen, called GAG, presented on the surface of HIV-infected cells by human leukocyte antigen (HLA). This is fused to an antibody fragment, anti-CD3, which activates the immune system to destroy the infected cells. The metabolic activity of the latent virus is very low so the quantity of antigen signal presented on the surface of latently-infected cell surface is below the threshold of detection of the body’s natural HIV-specific T cells. Immuncore has taken a TCR from the immune system T cells of an “elite responder” who has controlled their HIV naturally for many years, and increased its affinity so that it can target cells presenting very low levels of antigen signal. Immuncore, with collaborators from the Universities of Cardiff and Oxford, will determine whether this novel high-affinity reagent can find and destroy the latently-infected cells. If successful the next step would be to take the program into the clinic to evaluate the effect of a short course of drug treatment on top of anti-viral therapy in HIV patients with undetectable levels of virus, followed by a structured treatment interruption to observe viral rebound, or lack of it.

“These are bold ideas from innovative thinkers, which is exactly what we need in global health research right now”, said Dr. Tachi Yamada, president of the Gates Foundation’s [Global Health Program](#). “I’m excited to see some of these daring projects develop into life-saving breakthroughs for those who need them the most.”

About Grand Challenges Explorations

[Grand Challenges Explorations](#) is a five-year, \$100 million initiative of the Gates Foundation to promote innovation in global health. The program uses an agile, streamlined grant process – applications are limited to two pages, and preliminary data are not required.

Immunocore

Proposals are reviewed and selected by a committee of foundation staff and external experts, and grant decisions are made within approximately three months of the close of the funding round.

The next round of Grand Challenges Explorations will open in March 2011. More information, including grant application instructions and a list of topics for which proposals will be accepted, will be available at www.grandchallenges.org/explorations.

About Immunocore

[Immunocore Limited](http://www.immunocore.com) is developing innovative biological therapeutics to treat a range of cancers, chronic viral infections and diabetes. Immunocore is a clinical stage, privately owned biotechnology company located at Milton Park, near Oxford. The company traces its roots back to Avidex Limited which was founded in 1999 as a spin-out from the University of Oxford to develop technology invented by the founder and chief scientist, Dr Bent Jakobsen. Avidex was acquired in 2006 by the German company Medigene AG. In 2008, MediGene spun out two independent companies based on the same core TCR enhancement technology platform; Immunocore to develop soluble protein therapeutics and Adaptimmune to develop cellular therapies. More information about the company and technology is available at www.immunocore.com.

Immunocore contact: Ann Kramer (ann.kramer@immunocore.com)