

MCG groundbreaking carries promise for new biotech team

It exists only on paper for now, but Jin-Xiong She can already envision filling his part of a new research building at Medical College of Georgia.

The groundbreaking ceremony for Phase II of the Interdisciplinary Research Building will be held Wednesday, but Dr. She is already looking ahead 18 months to the building's completion and the creation of a home for the new Center for Biotechnology and Genomic Medicine.

"That was one of the deciding factors that helped us make a decision to come here," Dr. She said. "The opportunity to create a new center focusing on modern technology and medical applications was really attractive."

Recruited from the University of Florida to become director of the center, Dr. She brought with him a 20-person team that collaborates through the Internet with investigators worldwide. There are also plans to add eight more faculty members in the next few years.

And that will require space, Dr. She said.

"We have outgrown the space we were given," he said. "Space is really the No. 1 issue for us."

That's true particularly in light of two new grants worth \$6 million that the National Institutes of Health recently awarded the team.

"Which means we'll have to hire more people to actually do (the work)," said Dr. Richard McIndoe, associate director for the center, who was also recruited from Florida.

Team members' primary focus has been on autoimmune diseases such as type 1 diabetes, and they have already screened 10,000 newborns in Florida and Georgia for genetic susceptibility to the disease.

The team is hoping to soon begin a local screening program to help identify babies at high risk of the disease, Dr. She said. The hope is to find better genetic markers for the disease and someday persuade the states to add it to their newborn screening, he said.

"We are hoping type 1 diabetes will become the first common disease that will be screened (for) by the states," Dr. She said. "We are paving the way for the states to do

it."

The work will also focus on better ways to treat the disease and potentially cure it, he said.

"We really focus on finding a cure for the disease," Dr. She said. "But you have to identify future patients so you can prevent the disease in the young."

MCG is already reconsidering how it assigns research space and is looking for additional areas, but, with plans to double the amount of funded research in the next five years, new buildings will be needed, said Matthew J. Kluger, the vice president for research. There are already plans for a cancer research building, which MCG hopes to open a year or so after Phase II, and preliminary talks on a cardiovascular research building, Dr. Kluger said.

"You always have to be thinking five to seven years out," he said.

Reach Tom Corwin at (706) 823-3213 or tomc@augustachronicle.com.

Click here to return to story:

http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/082002/tec_071-7039.000.shtml