

Grant aims for alternatives to abortion-linked research

By CLAY HOLTZMAN
STAFF WRITER

A grant from one of Washington's largest foundations to a fledgling research organization could expand a debate in biomedical ethics reminiscent of clashes over the use of stem cells.

With a \$500,000 grant awarded in February from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust in Vancouver, Wash., the Sound Choice Pharmaceutical Institute says it will look for alternatives to the use of fetal tissue obtained through abortions in medical research and drug development.

The Seattle institute's goal is to find a new way to develop vaccines without the use of fetal cell lines, which the organization's founder, Theresa Deisher, opposes on moral grounds. She also contends that treatments derived from such sources could endanger patient safety.

"This is a fledgling but rapidly growing movement," said Deisher, who earned her doctorate in physiology from Stanford University. "It is not going to go away, and these are important safety issues for everyone that need to be resolved, not just debated."

Deisher also has founded a for-profit company, backed by investors, to com-

mercialize "morally produced" vaccines and stem cells.

Deisher, who founded her nonprofit institute in 2008, says alternatives such as animal cell lines should be used, which would give patients who refuse medicines derived from aborted fetuses a choice in their treatment.

However, most researchers say there is no adequate substitute for fetal cell lines and tissues.

"There is definitely value in using fetal tissue in research," said Jerome Strauss, dean of the School of Medicine at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Such tissues are particularly im-



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SEARCHING: Theresa Deisher is studying potential side effects of medical treatments derived from fetal tissue.

portant for studying miscarriages and stillbirths, he said. Strauss said fetal research has led to major discoveries, and institutions have strict protocols governing their use.

The Murdock Charitable Trust is one of Washington's largest philanthropies, with more than \$665 million in assets, according to its 2008 tax filing. The trust funds a variety of activities, including faith-based initiatives.

Under the two-year grant, Deisher will perform study the relationship between autism and vaccines that contain residual human DNA, using software to model the prevalence of autism and identify sites where residual DNA could combine with a patient's DNA.

She also will conduct lab experiments to examine, among other things, how much residual DNA existing vaccines contain. Results from the studies will be submitted for peer review and publication in scholarly journals, Deisher said.

Deisher is also managing member of a startup biotech company she founded in Seattle called AVM Biotechnology. The company has raised \$425,000 from angel investors and another \$700,000 in donated professional services, she said. The startup is focused on commercializing vaccines that do not use fetal materials and developing biologics that will improve the research effectiveness of adult stem cells, which can be an alternative to embryonic stem cells.

At the University of Washington, which in 2009 filled more than 4,400 requests for fetal tissues and cell lines, an institutional review board must approve all requests, said John Slattery, vice dean of research and graduate education at the UW School of Medicine.

The UW primarily obtains material from its network of hospitals and clinics.

Deisher estimates that there is a strong market among members of the anti-abortion movement, for what she calls "morally produced" vaccines. She estimates that 10 percent of the population refuses vaccines, and one-third of those cite religious or moral reasons.

But researchers say fetal cell lines and tissues cannot be replicated.

"It is hard for me to imagine an alternative tissue for something like that," Slattery said.

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