

Crain's New York Business
Health Care Report
March 24, 2008

Philanthropy to Researchers' Rescue; Big Names in NYC Step Up; Some Donations Tied to Personal Interests

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Memorial Sloan-Kettering's new cancer research center would most likely still be on its wish list if not for Morton Zuckerman, whose \$100 million donation to build it was the largest individual gift ever received by the hospital.

The real estate and media mogul is one of the new superdonors to medical research in New York. In the past five years, such individuals or private foundations have committed \$100 million or more to Columbia University Medical Center, Memorial Sloan-Kettering, New York University and Weill Cornell Medical College.

With government funding for medical science research flat and public investment for capital projects at the city's top medical schools nowhere to be found, this philanthropy is vital.

"Without the generosity of people like Mr. Zuckerman and others, we simply wouldn't be able to do the kind of science needed to understand and cure cancers that we're doing," says Dr. Harold Varmus, president of Memorial Sloan-Kettering, which has raised \$1.6 billion over the past five years.

The biggest of the big givers is Sanford Weill, the former head of Citigroup, whose \$250 million commitment to Weill Cornell Medical College last spring was the single largest ever made to a medical school. He says his first gift--\$5 million, in the late 1980s--was so rewarding that he simply kept going. His current tally for Weill Cornell stands at \$500 million.

The contributions fund a wide variety of research projects, though Mr. Weill jokes that he's particularly interested in Alzheimer's.

"I'm 75 now. Every time I see Dr. [Norman] Relkin, I tell him to hurry up," he says of the director of Weill Cornell's memory disorders program.

Foundation support

Most of the major donors are financiers and developers, or foundations connected to them.

For example, The Starr Foundation, endowed with \$3.5 billion by American International Group, the insurance and financial giant co-founded by C.V. Starr and Maurice Greenberg, regularly awards millions to the city's medical science institutions. It usually donates quietly but made a splash in 2006 with a \$100 million grant to fund a cancer research consortium.

Supergivers often have longtime connections to recipients.

In 2005, Dr. Jan Vilcek, a veteran scientist at the New York University School of Medicine, gave it \$105 million for research from the proceeds of a blockbuster drug he developed, in appreciation for the support he received from the school over 40 years for his own work.

Directed donations

Others, often guided by personal experience, direct their money to a particular research area.

The recent \$28 million gift from one of Columbia University Medical Center's biggest donors, The Russell Berrie Foundation, brings its giving related to diabetes research and treatment at the school to \$63 million. Both the late Mr. Berrie and his mother had diabetes.

The dearth of new funding from the National Institutes of Health for research helps impel Mr. Weill's generosity.

“The lack of federal funding resonates with private givers,” he says. “Doing advanced medical research is a very expensive game, and the schools need our support to do it right and do it well.”

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