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From left, Core Health Care Senior Adviser Larry Secrest, President Jim Misko and CEO Eric Makowski hope to obtain a research grant from the National Institutes of Health.

Brain injury center research may get boost from stimulus

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Core Health Care's vision to improve rehabilitative care for people with brain injuries could get a boost from the federal stimulus package.

Core Health Care in Dripping Springs, which specializes in brain injury rehabilitation, has teamed with Brigham Young University and the University of Texas Imaging Center on a \$5 million research project to test the efficacy of post-acute brain injury rehabilitation treatments through MRI imaging.

The project, which will require additional staffers and beds at Core Health Care's Dripping Springs 52-bed center specializing in brain injuries, only has a small fraction of the funding needed, CEO Eric Makowski said.

While Makowski and Core Health Care President Jim Misko plan to raise some of the money for the research project through private donations, they are also applying for a grant from the National Institutes of Health, the primary federal agency for supporting medical research. They've already raised \$200,000 from donors.

The health care provider's timing for going after an NIH grant couldn't be better. NIH, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has been charged with distributing \$10.4 billion in funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Of that, about \$8.2 billion will go to support scientific research priorities.

Core Health Care, which is seeking about \$2 million in NIH funding to complete the first phase of its study, is among a handful of local health care providers working to apply for the highly competitive NIH grant. Locally, Seton's Brain & Spine Center and St. David's NeuroTexas Institute have said they will pursue NIH grants to fund research and clinical studies.

Beyond serving as a seal of approval in the scientific realm, NIH grants also generate immediate economic benefits. It's widely accepted that \$1 spent on NIH-sponsored research generates \$2.50 in a local economy.

"We estimate NIH grant funding supports 300,000 jobs in the United States, approximately seven positions for each grant," NIH director Raynard Kington said in a congressional hearing late last year.

NIH anticipates that American Recovery and Reinvestment Act-funded grants will result in about seven jobs per grant.

And the track record for NIH-sponsored research is impressive.

Looking at about 31,000 NIH grants awarded during fiscal 2000, the organization reported the following: 30,477 invention disclosures, 17,341 nonprovisional patent applications and 6,909 patents.

In fact, 17 percent of all drugs approved by the Food and Drug Administration from 1982 to 2006 cited NIH patents as a factor, according to Kington.

Lauren Brandt, clinical director of neurosciences at the Brain & Spine Center at University Medical Center Brackenridge, said the center is working on several clinical studies in collaboration with the University of

Texas with the hope of obtaining NIH funding. The Brain & Spine Center has been involved in NIH-sponsored research in the past.

Brandt said that just applying for the grants is a competitive, intensive process requiring at least three research staffers.

The Brain & Spine Institute plans to seek funding for an ongoing spinal cord injury study and a stroke study.

An NIH grant has benefits beyond the financial, Brandt said.

"It is verification that we are doing state-of-the-art research. We are not only delivering the best care, but we are discovering the best care," she said.

Philippe Bochaton, chief administrative officer of the NeuroTexas Institute at St. David's HealthCare, says that with NIH validation comes strict federal guidelines, but that his institute welcomes that level of scrutiny.

"We've taken steps to position ourselves and have already started research projects, some of which we think will interest NIH," Bochaton said.

The institute will likely seek funding for research and clinical trials dealing with brain tumors, computation neurosciences and DNA analysis.

Bochaton said the institute hopes to collaborate with UT and Seton on future research projects.

Even though competition for a grant will be tough, Makowski is hopeful that Core Health Care's study, which is backed by a respected Brigham Young University researcher, has what NIH is looking for.

Such funding would enable Core Health Care to recruit patients in the study more quickly, but the research project is moving ahead regardless, Makowski said.



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