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$2.4-million funding opens new doors for emerging cancer researchers

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The LeadAction-Onco Competition was created by two Quebec-based key players in the cancer field, namely IRICoR and the Oncopole.

“We were impressed by the remarkable quality of the projects submitted as part of the recent Canada-wide LeadAction-Onco competition,” says IRICoR’s CEO Nadine Beauger.

Dr. Renaldo Battista, Oncopole’s Executive Director, notes: “We are optimistic that the projects selected will result in collaborative advances of great importance in the oncology field.”

The winners of the inaugural competition include:

Dr. Michel Duval, Investigator at the CHU Ste-Justine Research Centre, Montreal

SUPPLIED

Acute leukemia is a leading cause of cancer in children, with 40 per cent of patients with a refractory disease succumbing to their disease. Dr. Michel Duval and his team set out to create better outcomes. They proposed a novel therapeutic approach to maximize the effect of the immune system against leukemia by stimulating killer immune cells through an injection of special helper cells from cultures derived from cord blood.

“We are very grateful to LeadAction-Onco for their financial support,” says Dr. Duval. “It will accelerate the translation from the bench to the bedside of our innovative anti-leukemia immunotherapy.”

By using state-of-the-art technologies, Dr. Duval’s team will establish the safety of their cell therapy and extend its indication to all high-risk childhood leukemia.

Having access to this data means that a Phase I clinical trial will be opened to propose a new hope for a cure to children with incurable leukemia.

Marc Therrien, **Principal Investigator and Scientific Director at the Institute for Research in Immunology and Cancer of the University of Montreal**

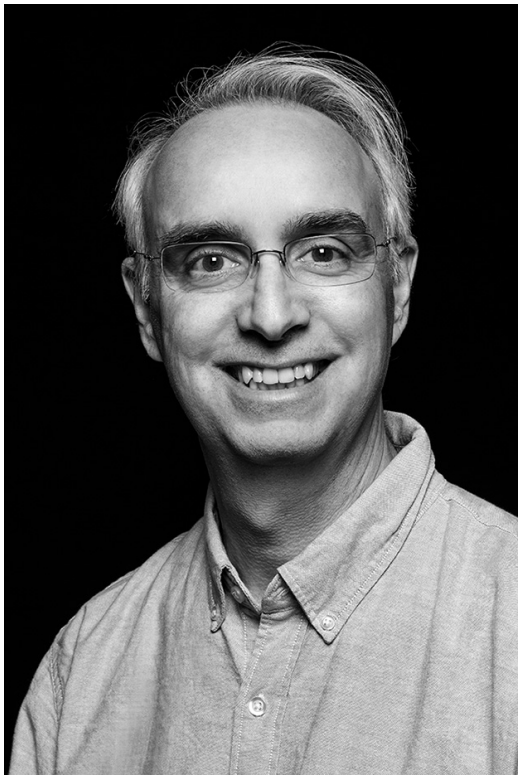

Photo credit: Justine Latour

The proposal of Marc Therrien and his team was focused on the aberrant activation of the RAS protein caused by mutations, involved in more than one-third of all human cancers.

Unfortunately, there are still no drugs that can block abnormal RAS activity in cancer cells. The team recently developed a new class of molecules that can bind to the RAS protein – a promising development that could have a positive impact on a number of cancer types.

The LeadAction-Onco Fund will allow the optimization of those molecules to increase their strength and selectivity for the purpose of generating the first real RAS pharmacological inhibitors.

“If the results are positive, clinical studies will be undertaken to create a spin-off drug that can effectively target a wide range of RAS activity-dependant cancers, such as pancreatic, colon and lung cancer,” he explains.

Anne Marinier, Principal Investigator and Director of the Medicinal Chemistry Core Facility at the Institute for Research in Immunology and Cancer of the University of Montreal

Photo credit: Justine Latour

Anne Marinier and her team identified an unmet medical need in addressing the poor outcomes of patients with acute myeloid leukemia (AML).

Recent studies show that a large portion of these exhibit a distinct genetic and metabolic identity sensitive to inhibition of electron transport chain complex I (ECT1) activity.

“This grant will allow my team to develop a new drug, working through a novel mechanism of action, to treat leukemia patients with very poor chances of survival,” she says. “Moreover, our data suggests that the drug could also be used to treat other types of cancers.”

Dr. Marinier sees the LeadAction-Onco program as a unique opportunity to advance early drug discovery programs to meaningful assets that can then become the basis for new company creation or research partnerships with pharmaceutical firms.

Dr. Gerald Batist, Director of the Segal Cancer Centre at the Jewish General Hospital, Montreal

SUPPLIED

The development of tumour resistance is a major problem leading to the failure of cancer treatments. The goal of Dr. Gerald Batist and his team was to use personalized medicine to address that critical issue.

“We need to find strategies that will help target specific abnormalities in the tumours, and treatments that will be given only to patients whose tumours bear those abnormalities,” Dr. Batist explains.

By targeting these mutant proteins with a new class of small drugs that are being developed, tumours can be selectively sensitized to anti-cancer treatments.

A genomic test can identify patients whose tumours bear this mutation and who would benefit from a type of “chemo sensitizer.”

“The potential is to dramatically enhance the benefits of various anti-cancer treatments to patients, with limited or no side effects,” he says.

His grant funds from IRICoR and the Oncopole will allow an accelerated development of his research.

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