U of T to Train Cyber Counsellors

By Sonnet Libbee

A new training program at the University of Toronto will teach counsellors how to train over the Internet to support children and youth. The Ministry of the Attorney General, Ontario’s Victim Services Secretariat, has provided funding in the Pastoral-Teenahinsa Facility of Social Work to develop a training program for online counselling.

Students in the master of social work program will get hands-on experience by responding to postings on the Kids Help Phone “Ask a Counsellor” website, while under supervision from social work faculty and the Kids Help Phone staff.

This new and innovative form of counselling will provide better access, education and direct support to children and youth.

By Professors Suyi Mishina and Rob MacPadden, this program will be among the few that prepare qualified counselors to provide cyber counselling.

"The technological revolution that has created new methods through which children and youth are victimized, such as cyber-stalking and cyber-bullying, has also created a new and increasingly preferred way of seeking help and counselling, particularly for young people," Mishina said. "Cyber counselling is an ideal medium because it provides accessibility to those youth who are isolated and anonymous for those that are reluctant to seek traditional counselling or support in a face-to-face situation.”

Student counsellors, with supervision support, review the questions that Children and teens post to a public web forum, then create and post their responses.

"It provides accessibility to those youth who are isolated and anonymous for those that are reluctant to seek traditional counselling or support in a face-to-face situation.”

MacPadden emphasizes that even with his years of counselling experience, he is amazed at what kids reveal when they are allowed to post questions anonymously rather than deal with an adult directly.

“It still sort of shocks me – the level of despair, the confusion and guilt around relationships and sexuality,” he said. “It’s a different world for so many of them. They really need someone to figure things out with.”

New Jackman Fellowship Established

By Paul Frumin

Follow Cunningham

Emeritus Hal Jackman’s historic $30 million gift to the humanities at U of T in May, the new Jackman Humanities Institute — founded with funds from Jackman’s gift — is establishing a major new fellowship.

The new Jackman Humanities Institute Research Fellowship is a 12-month fellowship that will be held in residence at the institute.

The terms of the fellowship include a full release from teaching with full salary for one year. In addition to working in residence at the Jackman Humanities Institute, the fellow will mentor younger fellows, participate in various institute activities and serve on the selection committee for other fellowships.

The other two fellowship options are continuations of the previous Jackman Research Fellowship in the Humanities, administered by U of T’s Connaught committee, a special committee of Governing Council. They are a six-month research leave, or a research grant of $55,000.

For a profile of a Jackman Fellow

See Page 6

Applicants must choose one of the three programs and applications are due by Oct 31. Final decisions on all fellowships will be made by the Connaught committee.

"This is an exciting development for the humanities," said Professor Robert Gibo, the institute’s director. "These fellowships of particular will go to great lengths to provide seed money and retain top scholars and students. We will be seeing some very exciting scholarship as a result of these fellowships in the coming years.”

The Jackman Humanities Institute has set annual themes for the first three years of the full-scale program. Each theme will help govern the selection of the various fellows at the institute as well as public conferences, seminars and workshops. The themes are: Telling Stories in 2008-2009; Pressures on the Human in 2009-2010; and Image and Spectacle in 2010-2011.

Visit www.humanities.utoronto.ca for further information on the terms of the fellowships.

Stem Cell Licensing Deal Positions Toronto as World Leader in Technology

By Karen Kelly

A $20-million deal to license Canadian stem cell technology in the U.S. underscores the Toronto area’s global leadership in stem cell research.

Under the agreement, Tissue Regeneration Therapies Inc. (TRT), an emerging Canadian life sciences company, will exclusively license its human umbilical cord perivascular cell (HUCPCV) technology to Stem Cell Authority Ltd. for family stem-cell banking in the U.S. The licensing fees and annual minimum royalties will exceed $20 million CDN over the next four years. The technology originated at the University of Toronto and has been offered to the public in Canada since March 2007 through a licensing agreement between TRT and Toronto-based CUREx Cord Blood Bank (CGBB).

"Toronto is the first place in the world to bank perivascular mesenchymal stem cells from the human umbilical cord and we are extremely pleased to now be able to provide this opportunity to parents across the U.S.,” said Professor John Davies of the Institute of Biomaterials and Biomedical Engineering, senior inventor of the technology. "This is a great example of how a university can facilitate the translation of professional research from the university laboratory to commercial reality for the benefit of the public.”

Using HUCPCV technology, once the baby is born a health professional simply collects the cord tissue and places it in a bio-container supplied with a nutrient solution and then ships it to the CUREx laboratories for processing and storage. A technician at the laboratory uses a proprietary process to remove the cells from the cord tissue and store them for future use.

Mesenchymal cells are the building blocks for the muscles, bone and connective tissues of the body. HUCPCVs also serve as regulators of the immune system. Published uses of mesenchymal cells in cell therapy include tissue engineering and combing Crohn’s disease, juvenile diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis, cancer and heart disease.

While the HUCPCV technology is still in the pre-clinical stage, TRT chief executive officer Jeremy Turner said that its development program offers parents a type of “biological life insurance” that could one day treat all the diseases mentioned above and more.

The HUCPCV breakthrough was announced in 2005 when the Davies research group at the University of Toronto discovered these stem cells in an unbleached part of the umbilical cord — the connective tissue immediately surrounding the blood vessels in the cord. The great advantages of this source of mesenchymal stem cells, compared with current techniques using surgically extracted cells from human bone marrow, lie in sourcing them from tissue that would otherwise be thrown away at birth, their rapid proliferation and the large numbers of harvested stem cells.