CROSSING THE LINES BETWEEN PARKINSON’S AND ALZHEIMER’S

Mounting Evidence of Biological Similarities Inspires Funding Program to Advance Understanding of Two Most Common Brain Diseases

CHICAGO, NEW YORK, TORONTO (February 5, 2014) — As research unveils overlap in the biology — in addition to long-noted shared clinical symptoms — of Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases, three non-profit organizations are uniting to encourage further study into the similarities and differences between the two most common brain diseases, which affect tens of millions of people worldwide.

The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research (MJFF), the Alzheimer’s Association and The W. Garfield Weston Foundation seek to inspire scientists to envision research projects that will use existing data and/or biological samples from two large-scale biomarker studies: the Parkinson’s Progression Markers Initiative (PPMI) and the Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI).

“Age is the biggest risk factor for these diseases, and with an aging population, the need for greater understanding and better treatments is urgent,” said Todd Sherer, Ph.D., CEO of MJFF. “We hope that through cross-disease analysis, we’ll uncover shared pathways or convergences, which could lead to therapies that could help patients across the continuum of neurodegeneration.”

The three organizations have created and funded a new research grant program — Biomarkers Across Neurodegenerative Disease — that will support initiatives including, but not limited to, those that:

- analyze datasets to test hypotheses related to aging and neurodegenerative disorders;
- seek to identify panels or pathways that may play a role in disease mechanisms, such as around inflammation;
- pursue shared or disparate biochemical markers of disease risk, onset or progression;
- or assess potential commonalities across the disease spectrum, including around other neurological disorders such as Lewy body dementia.
All projects must use data or specimens from both PPMI and ADNI. The two-year awards will grant up to $150,000, although higher cost projects may be considered. The W. Garfield Weston Foundation’s funding contribution will go to selected Canadian researchers.

“The most important aspect of this funding, in addition to the innovative collaboration between our three organizations, is the potential to uncover hidden secrets in the existing data; treasures that might have been missed, or which could only be found with the further analysis that these dollars will enable,” said Maria Carrillo, Ph.D., Alzheimer’s Association Vice President of Medical and Scientific Relations. “This program is an opportunity to leverage existing scientific information to generate possible real world solutions for people facing these devastating diseases.”

Although Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s are distinct conditions, mounting evidence shows possible links between the genetics and brain changes associated with them. For example, analysis from PPMI has shown that levels of a protein implicated in Alzheimer’s disease (amyloid-beta) are lower in the cerebrospinal fluid of individuals with Parkinson’s compared to individuals without Parkinson’s. In addition, postmortem studies have found heightened load of amyloid-beta in the brains of some people with Parkinson’s and increased presence of a Parkinson’s-implicated protein (alpha-synuclein) in some people with Alzheimer’s.

The PPMI study was modeled after ADNI, and they share similar methods of collecting and characterizing clinical and imaging data and biological samples. ADNI launched in 2004 through a public-private partnership that included the Alzheimer’s Association and was driven by the Foundation for the National Institutes of Health. This landmark study now includes more than 1,000 participants, including people without memory problems, individuals who may be at risk of developing Alzheimer’s, those with mild cognitive impairment and people with Alzheimer’s disease. PPMI began enrollment in 2010, met an initial goal of 400 Parkinson’s patients and 200 controls in April 2013, and now is recruiting people with Parkinson’s risk factors: smell loss, REM sleep behavior disorder and certain genetic mutations. Both studies have allowed qualified researchers access to data and biospecimens in real-time.

“With a new mandate to accelerate safe and effective treatments for neurodegenerative diseases of aging, we are excited that this program will help build bridges between Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s research,” said W. Galen Weston, Chairman and President of The W. Garfield Weston Foundation.

More information about how and when to apply for funding through this program is available at www.alz.org/BAND.

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About The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research
As the world’s largest nonprofit funder of Parkinson’s research, The Michael J. Fox Foundation
is dedicated to accelerating a cure for Parkinson’s disease and improved therapies for those living with the condition today. The Foundation pursues its goals through an aggressively funded, highly targeted research program coupled with active global engagement of scientists, Parkinson’s patients, business leaders, clinical trial participants, donors and volunteers. In addition to funding more than $400 million in research to date, the Foundation has fundamentally altered the trajectory of progress toward a cure. Operating at the hub of worldwide Parkinson’s research, the Foundation forges groundbreaking collaborations with industry leaders, academic scientists and government research funders; increases the flow of participants into Parkinson’s disease clinical trials with its online tool, Fox Trial Finder; promotes Parkinson’s awareness through high-profile advocacy, events and outreach; and coordinates the grassroots involvement of thousands of Team Fox members around the world. For more information, visit us on Facebook, Twitter, Web and LinkedIn.

About the Alzheimer’s Association
The Alzheimer’s Association is the world’s leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer’s disease care, support and research. It is the largest nonprofit funder of Alzheimer's research. Its mission is to eliminate Alzheimer’s disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health. Its vision is a world without Alzheimer’s. Visit www.alz.org or call 800.272.3900.

About The W. Garfield Weston Foundation
The W. Garfield Weston Foundation is a private Canadian family foundation, established in the 1950’s by Willard Garfield Weston and his wife Reta. In 1924 Garfield inherited his father’s company and during his life established baking and retail businesses throughout Canada and in many parts of the world. The founders believed that as the funds are generated through the hard work and success of his Canadian companies, grants should be given in Canada for the benefit of Canadians. For three generations, The W. Garfield Weston Foundation has maintained a family tradition of supporting charitable organizations across Canada. Today the Foundation directs the majority of its funds to projects in the fields of neuroscience, land conservation, education, and scientific research in Canada’s North.

MEDIA CONTACTS:
Maggie McGuire, 212-509-0995 ext. 295, mmcguire@michaeljfox.org
Niles Frantz, 312-335-5777, nfrantz@alz.org
Alexandra Stewart, 416-922-1383 ext. 5764, alexandra.stewart@weston.ca