POLICY & PRACTICE

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Initiative Aims to Propel ALS Research

New York–based Project A.L.S. has partnered with the Robert Packard Center for ALS Research at Johns Hopkins University on a new research initiative designed to rapidly advance the science behind ALS. The 3-year, $15 million project will bring together leading researchers in genetics, stem cell reprogramming, and glial-neuron signaling to get a better handle on the key genetic, biochemical, and cellular pathways that lead to ALS. The researchers will also focus on defining the primary molecular targets for the development of new ALS treatments.

The project, called P2ALS, is designed to speed up research because scientists from different disciplines will be able to rapidly test each other's discoveries. "P2ALS is the most exciting undertaking in ALS research ever," Dr. Jeff Rothstein, medical director for the Robert Packard Center for ALS, said in a statement. "The opportunity to bring a group of highly productive creative leaders from the Packard Center with those funded by Project A.L.S., including iPS biology, motor neuron and glial biology, and experts in drug discovery, with a milestone driven approach provides a fantastic opportunity to synergize ALS research in a way I have never seen."

Autism Research Gets Boost in Budget

The Obama administration is seeking $222 million in fiscal year 2011 to expand research into autism spectrum disorders. The funding, which would be spread through the Health and Human Services department, would focus on detection, treatment, and other activities with the potential to improve the lives of families affected by autism.

The National Institutes of Health is also putting a focus on the disorder. The agency plans to undertake a complete genome sequencing and DNA analysis of 300 autism spectrum disorder cases. Officials at the National Institutes of Health are also planning to launch the first epigenomic studies of brain samples from individuals who have autism spectrum disorders and those without the disorder. The National Institutes of Health will also investigate patterns of environmental exposure during pregnancy and the perinatal period.

Neuro Expert Will Lead Bioethics Org

Dr. Joseph J. Fins, an expert on ethical and policy issues in brain injury and neurology, has been chosen to lead the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities. He will assume his 2-year term as president in 2011. Dr. Fins is the chief of the division of medical ethics in the departments of public health and medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College. He is also a professor of public health and medicine in psychiatry. Dr. Fins is well known for his work in research ethics in neurology and psychiatry. He was a coauthor of a 2007 paper in Nature that described the first use of deep brain stimulation during a minimally conscious state. In a statement, Dr. Fins said he looks forward to assuming the presidency and working to "improve patient care, enrich medical education, and inform health policy."

CMS Launches Provider Survey

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services kicked off its fifth annual survey to determine provider satisfaction with Medicare fee-for-service contractors. The contractors process and pay more than $370 billion in Medicare claims each year. The Medicare Contractor Provider Satisfaction Survey offers physicians and other providers a chance to say how well their contractor handles inquiries, outreach, education, claims processing, appeals, reviews, and audits. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services said it is sending the 2010 survey to approximately 30,000 randomly selected providers, including practitioners, suppliers, and institutions. Participants can submit their responses confidentially online or via mail, fax, or telephone, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Results of the survey, which will take several months to complete, will be released on the CMS Web site this summer, the agency said.

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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