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# Cancer-fighting entrepreneurs

## UT leverages \$6M to lure researchers that will start laboratories

*Premium content from Austin Business Journal - by Sandra Zaragoza , ABJ Staff*

Friday, August 5, 2011

The Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas has invested \$10 million in recruiting up-and-coming star faculty to the University of Texas, bolstering Austin's position as a major cancer research market.

In late July, CPRIT approved grants for the three first-time, tenure-track faculty members who will launch cancer-related research startups at UT. CPRIT awarded the grants, each for \$2 million, to junior researchers **Jonghwan Kim**; Guangbin Dong and **Kyle Miller**. They're arriving in Austin armed with the means of starting a lab and hiring staff.

In just under two years, CPRIT has made 27 recruitment grants for either superstar, mid-career or junior faculty. In all, five of 27 CPRIT recruitment grants made statewide have gone to researchers at UT.

"From my perspective, that really establishes Austin as a focal point for cancer research, certainly in the state," said **Bill Gimson**, executive director of CPRIT.

The Austin market comes in third, behind Dallas and Houston, in terms of the largest concentration of CPRIT recruitment award recipients, Gimson said. By comparison, UT's sister institution, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, has nine CPRIT grant researchers, while the University of Texas San Antonio has one.

Approved by voters through a ballot initiative in 2007, CPRIT is a 10-year program that's been funded by \$450 million in bond funds for the last two years. In the program's second biennium, starting Sept. 1, it will receive the full \$600 million authorized by voters.

"Our legislation mandated to increase research superiority, and the best way is to attract the best and brightest in terms of research to the state," Gimson said. "We are trying to change the face of cancer research over the next 30 years, and a lot of that will be in the way of individuals who will conduct research here for 20 years."

UT's latest recruits, all first-time faculty members, come from top-tier schools and will be in different departments at UT's College of Natural Sciences.

Kim is from Harvard Medical School and Children's Hospital in Boston, and arrived in Austin this week to start work at the Section of Molecular Cell and Developmental Biology.

Dong, who was a postdoctoral fellow at the California Institute of Technology and was considered one of the top-ranked students in his native China, is already working in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry.

Miller was most recently part of the Gurdon Institute at the University of Cambridge. He will soon start at the Section of Molecular Genetics and Microbiology.

Meanwhile, UT's School of Engineering is in negotiations to hire **Ning Jiang**, who has been offered the same CPRIT grant. So far, 67 researchers have been nominated for the grant and 30 have been accepted. Seven researchers declined CPRIT to accept another offer.

CPRIT research grants are among the most attractive available for junior-level faculty, especially as less funding becomes available from sources such as the National Institutes of Health.

"Having the financial support for my research definitely was a big factor for coming to UT," Miller said. "Besides the funding, CPRIT is creating a lot of interest and support for cancer research in Texas, which has brought about the recruitment of top-notch cancer biologists, which will have a positive influence on my work."

The CPRIT grant is meant to cover the expenses of a research startup, everything from setting up labs to hiring staff. Many of these grants support an endeavor for about five years. After that, the university must support it, possibly with the help of other grants.

Armed with a grant from NIH, Kim said he would have still considered coming to UT, but he adds that the CPRIT funding is a rare opportunity for junior researchers.

"I think no other place except Texas provides this amount of research funding to juniors," Kim said.

**Brent Iverson**, chairman of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, said the CPRIT grant is likely the largest sum available for chemistry faculty, adding that it was crucial in attracting Dong to UT.

"It's hard to overstate the value of these grants in recruitment efforts," Iverson said. "This was an extremely important tool, and it's really exciting for us to be able to compete at this level for the best people in the world."

Dong's arrival not only strengthens the chemistry program, but also enables collaborations on cancer-related projects being done at places like MD Anderson in Houston, Iverson said.

The recruitment grants have the potential for three big returns, Gimson said: "game-changing breakthroughs, leveraged dollars that will attract more grants to Texas and, the most important in my mind, the discoveries that will impact cancer patients in the state of Texas and save lives."

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**