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Program to boost autism research

Associated Press

Princeton-based unit gives \$140G

Two groups that help autism patients and fund research on the disorder have launched a new collaboration to increase the amount of brain tissue from deceased people with autism available for scientific research.

The Princeton-based National Alliance for Autism Research is committing \$140,000 for the initiative, a new part of the Autism Tissue Program, which the alliance and the Autism Society of America established in 1998.

The program gives qualified scientists access to post-mortem brain tissue to advance research on the developmental neurological disorder; the new collaboration will develop standard procedures for outreach, registration, tissue collection and storage.

"In the field of neuroscience, as it pertains to autism research, brain tissue is the most valuable material on the planet, enabling

scientists to go far beyond the constraints of other technologies and study autism on both a cellular and molecular level," said Prisca Chen Marvin, president of the alliance.

Autism, usually diagnosed by age 3, leaves children with limited ability to communicate or interact socially. Many obsessively perform repetitive behaviors, such as spinning in circles.

While the exact cause of autism is unclear, scientists believe there is a genetic component that leaves the brain "wired differently," Andy Shih, director of the alliance's research programs, said yesterday.

Determining which genes are involved could lead to a treatment. There currently is no treatment for autism other than behavioral therapy programs that help people learn to do ev-

eryday tasks and build stronger bonds with family and caretakers. However, that doesn't work for most patients and is generally effective only if begun very early, Shih said.

"If you can identify genes that confer susceptibility to autism, you can actually help the medical community to diagnose autism more definitively and earlier," he said.

Diagnosis currently is based on lengthy observation of a child's behavior. Because an official diagnosis is usually required for autistic children to get into special education programs, earlier determination with a gene-based test could help patients and families, Shih said.

While the medical community has learned more about autism in the last decade and no longer automatically lumps it together with mental retardation, little is

known about adults with autism and most are institutionalized, Shih said.

Most of the brain tissue collected under the existing program comes from children with autism, who suffer more fatal accidents, such as drowning, and thus have a higher mortality rate than other children, according to one preliminary study Shih cited.

Under the new collaboration, the alliance will partner with Autism Society of America chapters in Iowa, Maine, Michigan and New Mexico to increase education and awareness about autism and outreach for tissue from deceased patients.

"We believe the Autism Tissue Program is an important component in our understanding of the autism puzzle," said Rob Beck, executive director of the society.

On the Net: <http://www.naa-r.org>