

# New chance at funding thrills Ohio scientists

## Stimulus measure to fund backlog of worthy projects

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BY DOUG CARUSO

### THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Last year, the National Institutes of Health turned down an Ohio State University researcher's grant proposal to advance the study of osteoarthritis, a joint disease that's expected to affect one in four adults by 2030.

Metin Gurcan wants to create computer programs that can sort through thousands of X-rays and other medical images for clues that show how the disease develops.

When NIH reviewed his proposal last fall, "They said wonderful things about our project," Gurcan said. "But they said it would not be funded."

That was before President Barack Obama signed the \$787 billion economic stimulus package in February. Now, Gurcan says he is in line for a two-year, \$1 million grant.

The stimulus bill pumped \$10 billion in new money into NIH, including \$7.4 billion for scientific research and \$1 billion for labs and other facilities.

The National Science Foundation received \$3 billion, including \$2.5 billion for research and \$400 million for lab facilities. An additional \$2 billion is available for research through the U.S. Department of Energy.

Ohio State and other research institutions, including Ohio University, Nationwide Children's Hospital, Battelle and the Ohio Supercomputer Center, hope to land millions of that money.

"For some of our investigators, this represents an exceptional opportunity to get research funding where they might not otherwise," said Dr. John Barnard, president of Nationwide Children's Research Institute.

"That particularly relates to some of the young scientists who have been locked out of funding because of very tight NIH budgets over the last five years."

Children's has applied for 50 NIH grants that total about \$30 million, Barnard said. The institute already has received word that \$2 million is coming for grants that were in the pipeline last year.

Not only does the NIH have more money to dole out, it is further along than other federal science agencies in making the money available.

**Stimulating research**  
The economic stimulus bill includes billions of dollars for scientific research and laboratories. Researchers throughout central Ohio are applying. Most applications so far are through the National Institutes of Health. More applications will come later.

WHO HAS THE MONEY	FOR RESEARCH	FOR FACILITIES
National Institutes of Health	\$7.4 billion	\$1 billion
National Science Foundation	\$2.5 billion	\$400 million
Department of Energy	\$2 billion	—

  

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS SEEKING IT	APPLICATIONS	TOTAL REQUESTS
Ohio State University	250	\$110 million
Ohio University	30	\$50 million
Nationwide Children's Hospital	50	\$30 million

Sources: American Recovery and Reinvestment Act; research institutions

[Click here to enlarge graphic](#)

That's because the agency had a backlog of about 14,000 solid research proposals waiting for funding, said Caroline Whitacre, vice president for research at Ohio State.

As of last week, she said, "We already had four people who had money in hand."

OSU has about 250 applications for grants totaling \$110 million.

"I have no idea what proportion of that might be funded," Whitacre said. "It's such a crapshoot."

There might be a lot more money out there, but there also is a lot of competition. When NIH announced that it planned to give out 200 \$1 million grants for new research, it received 20,000 applications.

"These are 20,000 applications from the most brilliant scientists in the United States," Barnard said, "and they have a 1 percent chance of getting them."

Ohio State also will renovate two laboratories with NIH facilities money. The university had applied for matching grants in 2004 to renovate a lab floor in its biomedical research tower and a laboratory on its veterinary campus.

NIH contacted the university this year and offered to pay the entire \$12 million cost with no match necessary, Whitacre said. "So the grant really doubled."

Ohio University got a similar call from the agency this spring about an earlier proposal for grants to build a \$5 million environmental biology building, said Rathindra Bose, the university's vice president for research. "Unfortunately, we've already built it," he said.

But Ohio University is applying for about 50 other NIH grants and also is using its position as a rural medical school to apply for health-care information technology grants. A chunk of the \$20 billion in stimulus funds for electronic patient records and other health system improvements is set aside for rural areas, Bose said.

The university also is preparing applications for energy research.

"I think we have enormous strength in alternative energy and clean-coal technology, and we are looking forward to submitting those proposals," Bose said.

Proposals for \$400 million in Department of Energy money to push research into new energy sources are due June 2.

Ohio State, Ohio University, Case Western Reserve University and Battelle all are looking for a slice of that money.

Don McConnell, president of Battelle Energy Technology, said the research institute is proposing projects to capture carbon emissions and improve the efficiency of electrical storage.

With all this money come some concerns.

While most federal grants require an annual report, the transparency provisions of the stimulus bill require grant recipients to report each quarter. Universities are unlikely to be able to use the grant money to pay for such overhead costs.

Recipients also are required to spend the money within two years, and they know there's no guarantee that more money will come.

"You have to be cognizant of it and understand that the overriding purpose of the stimulus bill is to create

jobs and stimulate the economy," said Dave Bell, vice president for government and community relations at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Gurcan, an assistant professor of biomedical informatics at OSU, said his \$1 million grant will help him buy state-of-the-art computer systems and hire two researchers.

"It will have a ripple effect," he said. It will also support two doctorate and three medical students over the next two years.

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