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Center for Neuroscience Drug Discovery faces 'critical' year

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The Vanderbilt Center for Neuroscience Drug Discovery and an unidentified company are in late-stage negotiations that, once completed, will allow for testing of compounds for the treatment of Parkinson's disease.

The compounds have been developed with the financial support of the Michael J. Fox Foundation, a partnership that has made possible the center's efforts to proceed more deliberately than perhaps otherwise would have been the case and, as such, find a pharmaceutical industry partner fully committed to the Vanderbilt program, according to Dr. Jeff Conn, director of the VCNDD.

"It's at a important point," Conn said of the negotiations. "We need to put the most critical language in the contract to maximize the likelihood these compounds will help Parkinson's patients."

The negotiations, a completion timetable for which Conn declined to provide, are the latest in major work the Vanderbilt Center for Neuroscience Drug Discovery has undertaken since 2005. The center is essentially attempting to place potentially life-saving compounds — including those to fight Parkinson's, schizophrenia and an autistic spectrum disorder called Fragile X syndrome — in final pre-clinical tests required by the Food and Drug Administration.

Once the tests are concluded, human trials will follow.

The center's findings represent the first example of an academic group effectively and methodically delivering a comprehensive list of drug candidates to the pharmaceutical industry. Typically, such efforts are not so coordinated, Conn said. The work demonstrates, he said, that academic drug discovery can be successful in building pipelines of new medicines for innovative approaches that potentially could positively treat the most serious human disorders.

Conn, who also serves as a member of the Michael J. Fox Foundation Scientific Advisory Board, said 2012 will be key in the center's efforts to expand its work with Alzheimer's disease and depression.

"We want to develop the data sets required to allow testing of these drug candidates," he said.

The most recent major news from the VCNDD involved the center's hitting a milestone with its partnership with Johnson & Johnson, Conn said.

"J&J is now overseeing the study required to gain FDA approval for clinical studies," he said, adding the FDA could finalize approval by the end of 2012.

In addition to Johnson & Johnson, the Vanderbilt Center for Neuroscience Drug Discovery has collaborated with Seaside Therapeutics and Karuna Pharmaceuticals.

"We're working with the companies to develop new molecules to be advanced into testing on patients," he said. "It's a critical year."

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