American Cancer Society Awards NBC TODAY Show's "Shine A Light" Funds to Dr. Andras Heczey of Texas Children's Cancer Center

Monies raised through Hoda Kotb's outreach campaign will support groundbreaking neuroblastoma research

December 16, 2015- The American Cancer Society has selected Dr. Andras Heczey of Texas Children's Cancer Center as the recipient of a four-year grant funded by TODAY Show viewers through its "Shine A Light" campaign. The American Cancer Society also contributed from its own research budget to ensure the grant's full funding. Dr. Heczey will launch a project to assess and perfect cell therapy as a means of treating neuroblastoma, a common cause of cancer-related deaths in infants and children. The findings from this work will contribute significantly to an overall understanding of the expanding role of cell therapy in pediatric cancer.

Beginning Jan. 1, 2016, Dr. Heczey will begin efforts to test cell therapy on neuroblastoma models, measure its safety and effectiveness, and take subsequent steps to increase the treatment's efficacy. Neuroblastoma is the third most common cause of childhood cancer deaths and is, outside of brain tumors, the most common solid cancer type among children..

"Neuroblastoma is a critical area of pediatric cancer research," Dr. Heczey explains. "In general, we have made huge strides towards treating and beating many childhood cancers. Thanks to ongoing research supported by organizations like the American Cancer Society, we now see upwards of 80 percent five-year overall survival rates for infants and children with cancer. That's incredible advancement. Sadly, however, only approximately half of patients who receive a high-risk neuroblastoma diagnosis survive and we haven't seen dramatic improvement in the outlook of newly diagnosed patients. Progress is urgently needed, and I am confident that immunotherapy is the key to saving more young lives from neuroblastoma."

"Immunotherapy is the most exciting and rapidly advancing approach to treating cancer," says Dr. Bill Chambers, senior vice president, extramural research for the American Cancer Society. "The results of clinical trials in a number of settings have been terrific. Funds raised by Hoda Kotb of the TODAY Show, made funding of this work possible and together with some donations made directly to the Society we are fully funding the $583,000 of the proposed work. We thank Hoda Kotb and the TODAY Show team for their incredible support, and we thank every person who donated to this effort for making Dr. Heczey's vision a reality."

About Shine A Light:

At the beginning of 2014, NBC's TODAY Show unveiled a new outreach project called "Shine a Light," a 16 month -long initiative focused on service and giving back to communities in need. Each TODAY show anchor and host chose a worthy cause to support throughout the year. Co-host Hoda Kotb designated pediatric cancer as her cause and chose the American Cancer Society as her benefitting charity. Funds raised through Hoda's "Shine a Light" campaign were earmarked for pediatric cancer research through the Society's extramural research program.

About Dr. Andras Heczey and his Research

Dr. Andras Heczey is a physician-scientist and full-time faculty member in the Department of Pediatrics of Baylor College of Medicine, Section of Pediatric Hematology and Oncology. He is a member of the multidisciplinary solid tumor team of Texas Children's Cancer Center at Texas Children's Hospital. He is also a member of Baylor

College of Medicine’s Dan L. Duncan Cancer Center and its Center for Cell and Gene Therapy.

Dr. Heczey’s proposal with the American Cancer Society’s extramural research program is to manipulate a particular cell of the immune system – Natural Killer T lymphocytes (NKTs) – by first “educating” these cells to the presence of a growing neuroblastoma, and then “directing” these NKTs to kill the neuroblastoma and other tumor supporting cells. The impact of Dr. Heczey’s work will be to evaluate numerous “anti-tumor” aspects of NKT cells, including their homing to the tumor, their engraftment in the tumor, and ultimately their NKT cell anti-tumor function, all in support of a planned clinical trial at Texas Children’s Cancer Center.

The major innovation in this exciting project is the use of the NKT cell population. The NKT cell population provides a novel, and largely unexplored, population for cancer immunotherapy. Dr. Heczey and his team will begin to unlock the potential for NKT cells in mechanistic studies and through clinical trials; he is uniquely positioned to drive this outstanding project forward.

About the American Cancer Society:

The American Cancer Society is a global grassroots force of more than three million volunteers saving lives and fighting for every birthday threatened by every cancer in every community. As the largest voluntary health organization, the Society's efforts have contributed to a 20 percent decline in cancer death rates in the U.S. since 1991, and a 50 percent drop in smoking rates. Thanks in part to our progress nearly 14 million Americans who have had cancer and countless more who have avoided it will celebrate more birthdays this year. We're determined to finish the fight against cancer. We're finding cures as the nation’s largest private, not-for-profit investor in cancer research, ensuring people facing cancer have the help they need and continuing the fight for access to quality health care, lifesaving screenings, clean air, and more. For more information, to get help, or to join the fight, call us anytime, day or night, at 1-800-227-2345 or visit cancer.org.
