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RENDELL ADMINISTRATION ANNOUNCES HEALTH RESEARCH GRANTS FROM TOBACCO SETTLEMENT FUNDS

HARRISBURG – Health Secretary Everette James today announced four health research grants totaling nearly \$18 million will be awarded from Pennsylvania’s share of the national tobacco settlement for 2008-09.

These competitive grants focus on specific research priorities established and reviewed annually by the statewide Health Research Advisory Committee, chaired by Secretary James. The priorities for 2008-09 are autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and antibiotic resistance. Each grant is required to establish a research training program for minority students and faculty in order to create a diverse applicant pool for high-level research positions.

“These grants will support research that seeks to find answers to some of Pennsylvania’s most pressing health issues,” said Secretary James. “This announcement also reaffirms Governor Rendell’s commitment to use tobacco settlement dollars to improve public health and maintain Pennsylvania’s internationally recognized leadership in clinical and health services research.”

Antibiotic-resistant infections are a growing and serious public health problem, particularly in health care settings. While most bacterial infections can be effectively controlled using existing antibiotic drugs, there has been a significant increase in antibiotic drug resistance rates in health care institutions during the past 25 years. It has been estimated that more than 70 percent of the bacteria that cause health care infections have resistance to at least one or more

antibiotic drugs. More than 27,000 hospital-acquired infections were reported in Pennsylvania in 2007. Patients that acquired a hospital infection stayed more than three times longer in the hospital and their admission was four times as expensive as any other hospital admission. Many of these infections are caused by bacteria resistant to most, if not all, currently available drugs.

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) ranks among the most prevalent causes of infections in hospitals. It is easily transmitted within the hospital and is now found in the community. *Acinetobacter baumannii* (*A. baumannii*) and *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*), other bacteria that have developed drug resistance, also cause life-threatening infections and are prevalent in U.S. hospitals. Research aids in better understanding the transmission of these deadly bacteria and developing improved strategies to prevent and control the spread in hospital and community settings.

Research is also needed to address ASD which have reached unprecedented levels, affecting 1 in 150 children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. ASD include autism and related pervasive developmental disorders such as Asperger syndrome, Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder. Currently, there is no cure for the disorders, and treatments are limited. Studies that investigate genetic factors, brain function and structure are needed to improve our understanding of how the minds of autistic children work.

The four grants that are being awarded under these two priorities during state fiscal year 2008-2009 include:

- **The University of Pennsylvania**, in collaboration with the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Lincoln University, and the Pennsylvania State University, will receive \$5.5 million to study why patients with MRSA infections frequently experience recurrent infections despite appropriate treatment. Researchers also will determine how often MRSA spreads among household members and the factors contributing to the spread of MRSA within the household. An intervention to prevent new and recurring MRSA infections will be tested.

- **The University of Pittsburgh**, in partnership with Carnegie Mellon University, will receive \$4.7 million to study new ways to reduce infections caused by *A. baumannii*, *C. difficile*, and MRSA in hospitalized patients. The project will assess the health and economic impacts of these novel strategies on the prevention and control of infections caused by these multidrug resistant bacteria. *A. baumannii* is a severe, difficult-to-treat infection in seriously ill hospitalized patients. *C. difficile* is resistant to numerous drugs and causes serious infection among patients already on antibiotics.
- **The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)**, collaborating with the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University, Lincoln University and the Philadelphia Public School system, will receive \$4.7 million to conduct research aimed at gaining a better understanding of the biological causes of ASD. The studies are based at CHOP’s new Center for Autism Research, a collaborative center of emphasis that draws upon faculty and staff at CHOP and Penn in more than ten different disciplines. Researchers will study how recently discovered genes for ASD affect the brain and behavior of children with an ASD, including a study of how genes, brain structure and brain function impact treatment response. Findings from the research project will facilitate the development of more effective tests for diagnosing ASD and will lay the necessary groundwork for major advances in the clinical care of ASD.
- **The University of Pittsburgh**, in association with Carnegie Mellon University, will receive \$3 million to identify cognitive and genetic mechanisms underlying the abnormal development of brain circuitry associated with ASD. Recent research has demonstrated altered information processing by the brain of persons with autism. Researchers will develop and test a new intervention to enhance thinking capacity and meaningful integration of information and brain circuitry. Researchers will also conduct gene expression studies to identify genes potentially responsible for the development of altered brain circuitry in ASD. This evidence will be used to guide a more refined search for ASD candidate genes.

These grants are awarded as part of the Commonwealth Universal Research Enhancement Program (CURE), which supports clinical, health services, and biomedical research.

More information on the use of tobacco settlement funds can be found at the Pennsylvania Department of Health’s Web site for health research grants program at www.health.state.pa.us/cure.