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Gambling on research has its payoffs

Couple's wealth helps Find cures

By Robert Channick
Special to the Tribune

When Dr. Raghu Mirmira begins potentially groundbreaking research next month at the University of Virginia to try to reverse diabetes with gene therapy, he'll have an unusual band of cheerleaders in the Chicago area.

Chief among them will be George and Judy Goldman, a retired Lake Forest couple who created a medical research foundation that is helping fund Mirmira's work.

Goldman Philanthropic Partnerships began five years ago with an eye toward supporting high-risk, high-reward research projects--the kind that might be regarded as too speculative to get funding but have potential to reap benefits.

Already, the Goldmans' Deerfield-based group has spent millions helping launch 17 research projects into such things as zapping breast cancer with energy beams, using yoga to thwart panic attacks and treating herpes with acupuncture.

"We fund the projects that aren't getting funding anywhere else but have the potential to be breakthroughs in curing disease," said Dr. Bruce Bloom, 47, chief executive officer of the not-for-profit foundation.

In the process, the Goldmans have attracted other donors, often people affected by the diseases to be researched. For Mirmira's project, for example, the Goldmans won support from Bobby Miller, 35, of Chicago, who owns a real estate investment firm. His wife, Lori, 34, has diabetes.

The Millers approached family and friends to help raise \$40,000 for Mirmira's study.



"It hits home personally," Bobby Miller said.

Mirmira's three-year study is among six new projects the Goldman foundation is helping launch this year, including partnerships with Northwestern University and Rush University Medical Center.

It's the latest research project for a foundation that has become known for its ability to drum up support for little-known studies with big potential.

After the Goldmans raised \$500,000 for the University of Virginia study, the American Diabetes Association gave an additional \$900,000, officials said.

"The project definitely would not have come together without the Goldmans," said Tim Redden, a university spokesman.

This year, the Goldman foundation will fund \$1.5 million of research, with a budget of \$2.5 million next year and upward of \$5 million by 2006, Bloom said. The foundation requires recipients to match donations.

The Goldmans started the foundation with \$5 million of their own money after Judy Goldman survived a rare and potentially deadly blood plasma cancer called multiple myeloma.

When she was diagnosed in 1990, little was known about the disease, which strikes 14,000 mostly elderly Americans each year.

Told she had less than five years to live, the Goldmans sold their successful real-estate business and took cruises to exotic locales between chemo treatments at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

"If I was going to die, I worked hard

to earn this money, I wasn't going to let his next wife get it," said Judy Goldman, 70. "I was going to enjoy it."

When Judy Goldman went into remission after several years, the couple unpacked their bags and created the foundation to accelerate myeloma research.

Their first project was a 1999 collaboration with the Mayo Clinic using thalidomide, a sleeping pill banned 40 years ago for causing birth defects, to slow myeloma by reducing blood supply to cancer cells. The Goldmans provided \$300,000.

Thalidomide has since supplanted chemotherapy as the preferred initial treatment. The results turned an unknown researcher, Dr. Vincent Rajkumar, 39, into a rising medical star with nearly \$3 million in government grants and his own lab at the Rochester Mayo Clinic. Rajkumar credits the Goldmans for helping bring attention--and support--to his work.

"If the Goldman funding wasn't there, it is possible that it would have taken me several years to get where I am, or it's even possible that I might not have pursued a research career at all," he said.

These days, Rajkumar's work is regarded highly enough that he receives grants from the National Institutes of Health, the federal government's medical research funding arm.

Other researchers are not as fortunate. Last year, NIH spent more than \$27 billion in medical research, but fewer than 30 percent of new project grant applications were funded, according to NIH. First-time applicants had only a 22 percent success rate.

There are about 200 charitable organizations funding medical research in the Chicago area, but only 10 private foundations like the Goldmans', said Suzanne Coffman, spokeswoman for GuideStar, a Williamsburg, Va., company that maintains a national database of non-profit groups.

Mary Woolley is president of Research!America, a non-profit medical research advocacy group based in Alexandria, Va.

"People like the Goldmans--who have been successful in life and who have confronted a difficult disease--want to give back," she said.

Goldman Philanthropic Partnerships
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