

Retrieved from NJ.com (October 29, 2002)

A Groundbreaking idea for kids' health

Tuesday, October 29, 2002

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Bringing biomedical research directly from the laboratory to the bedsides of children with cancer, diabetes and other diseases will be the sole focus of scientists working in a new \$72 million research facility in New Brunswick.

Construction is set to begin next month and be completed in two years on the Child Health Institute of New Jersey, a five-story building that will be part of the UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. It will include 150,000 square feet of research labs.

The institute is being built on land between Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital's Children's Hospital and a tract where officials plan to build a satellite rehabilitation site for the Children's Specialized Hospital, which has its main campus in Mountainside. The new institute also will be joined by a walkway to the Cancer Institute of New Jersey and the medical school's new cardiovascular institute.

Harold Paz, dean of the medical school, said 14 principal investigators will be hired to work in the institute and conduct research aimed at finding the environmental and genetic causes of diseases and disorders. Besides cancer and diabetes, researchers will focus on other problems, including autism, asthma, mental retardation and attention deficit disorder.

"This institute will bring medical research from the laboratory bench to patients' bedsides seamlessly," he said.

A groundbreaking ceremony for the institute was held under a tent at the site yesterday.

"This really is a dream come true," said Douglas Compton, 37 of Glen Gardner, father of a 9-year-old son, Daniel, who has autism, a developmental disability often characterized by impaired verbal and non-verbal communication and social isolation.

Compton, a member of the Governor's Council on Autism at UMDNJ, said he believes there are both genetic and environmental causes of autism.

"This is a complex disorder. There just won't be one single marker," concurred Roland Machold, vice chairman of the Child Health Institute's board. A former state treasurer, Machold also heads a school for autistic children called the Princeton Child Development Institute. His 37-year-old son is autistic.

UMDNJ officials have secured nearly half the amount of money needed to pay for the ambitious project.

Started three years ago, the institute has raised \$16.6 million from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and another \$6.6 million from Johnson & Johnson, according to Betsy Garlatti, the institute's executive director. She said federal grants amount to another \$8 million and the state of New Jersey has so far contributed about \$3.7 million, bringing the total to just under \$35 million.

The remainder of the money will come from private donors, as well as from foundations and corporations, said Roger Fine, chairman of the UMDNJ Foundation.

"It's not just a question of putting up a building," he said. "But I believe if there is anything people are passionate about, it's the future and health of our children."