



The Gotham Prize: a beacon for cancer researchers

A new cancer research prize has been established with funding from an unlikely source. Two hedge fund managers, Joel Greenblatt and Robert Goldstein of private investment firm Gotham Capital, together with Gary Curhan of Harvard Medical School, have created the Gotham Prize for Cancer Research. One million dollars will be awarded annually to an individual with the most innovative idea in cancer research, with an additional \$250,000 prize for the best idea in pediatric oncology, sponsored by the Ira Sohn Conference Foundation.

The prize was launched in May at the 12th annual Ira Sohn Investment Research Conference, a charity cancer event named for a financial trader who died of cancer at age 29 in 1993. Greenblatt and Goldstein conceived of the prize to parallel a successful idea they had within the investment community: they were involved in starting the Value Investors Club (VIC; <http://www.valueinvestorsclub.com>) in 2000. The club and associated Web site were set up to attract like-minded investors to share investment ideas. Based on the success of the VIC, they believed that with the proper incentives, scientists would reveal their new ideas about prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of cancer. They hoped that the sharing of ideas would lead to faster progress in cancer research. In order to make their vision a reality, they enlisted the help of their friend and colleague Gary Curhan, who is best known for studying the epidemiology of a variety of chronic diseases. Curhan has taken the

lead in running the Gotham Prize and has assembled a panel of expert reviewers to help evaluate the various proposals.

Unique to this prize is the way it is structured — no invitations to apply are issued, and the submission of ideas is not restricted: scientists and non-scientists alike are welcome to share their ideas anonymously on a common Web site (<http://www.gothamprize.org>). Those who want to apply must first apply for membership to the Web site and be approved by the advisory committee. Curhan tells the *JCI*, “The response has been overwhelming. We have received over 100 applications for membership.” Members of the Web site first post a short synopsis of their idea about the diagnosis, prevention, treatment, or etiology of cancer, and other members are then encouraged to discuss the ideas on the Web site. While the official deadline for submitting a proposal for consideration for this year’s prize is December 31, Curhan says that “the quality of the online discussion will be one of the factors considered in selecting the winner so the sooner an idea is submitted the better.” Applications for the 2007 prize will be evaluated in January 2008 and the winner announced the following month; Curhan notes that the idea is to continue awarding the Gotham Prize and the Ira Sohn pediatric prize in perpetuity.

The anonymous nature of the postings on the Web site is another distinct feature. According to the Gotham Prize Web site, in the current, or traditional, research funding climate, “scientists and researchers who do not fit a specialized profile or carry traditional credentials are unlikely to be funded to pursue new theories or follow controversial avenues.” Curhan adds, “The online discussion is a very important aspect of the site. We believe that individuals are more likely to provide frank and honest assessments if they are anonymous.”

The content of the Web site and the various proposals will also be made available to foundations, individuals, and groups that fund cancer research. There is the potential for ideas to be matched with funding sources or other scientists who may be able to support, assist with, or collaborate on individual projects. Curhan tells the *JCI* that the organizers of the prize are not actively court-

ing any companies or members of industry, however, should an idea be embraced by an industrial contact, there may be issues of intellectual property. To this, Curhan states, “We make it very clear that the ideas are to be shared and will be available to all members and guests of the site.” Generating revenue for the researchers is not a main goal of the Gotham Prize, as their introduction to the application criteria adds that “research funded by for-profit entities has obvious limits. Research that leads to non-patentable treatments or cures is not usually funded by the for-profit world. Most areas of prevention are ignored. Research that involves long lead times and/or basic science also does not receive enough support.”

The organizers have requested that the ideas submitted focus on the most common types of cancer. The Web site states that “the idea needs to be one that can be practically tested to determine its success, but it is the idea that will qualify you for membership and make you eligible for the prize; demonstration of success by you or others is not required.” So far, the research proposals submitted have ranged from screening various anticancer compounds and genetic screens to more far-fetched ideas, such as using sonic therapy to kill cancer cells. The wide breadth of ideas submitted will give the organizers much to discuss, especially the ideas proposed by those who are not practicing cancer biologists. Curhan notes to the *JCI*, “Everyone is eligible. The decision for acceptance of a member is the quality of the idea, not the qualifications of the individual. We hope and expect that some of the more novel ideas will come from individuals who are not currently actively studying cancer, though they may be scientists in other fields.”

The organizers hope that the Gotham Prize will help to fill some of the gaps and lead to accelerated progress in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of cancer. “I have seen firsthand how many ideas with incredible potential never reach fruition,” Curhan has said. “We will only make significant progress in cancer research by learning from each other’s successes and mistakes and by building on each others’ knowledge.”

Ushma S. Neill



Cancer researchers try to curry favor with Curhan.