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(From left) Weill Cornell Medical College Dean Laurie Glimcher, Memorial Sloan Kettering President Craig Thompson, and The Rockefeller University President Marc Tessier-Lavigne formalize the Tri-Institutional Therapeutics Discovery Institute and its partnership with Takeda Pharmaceutical Company, represented by Director Tadataka Yamada (far right).

## Summary

Memorial Sloan Kettering is joining with two other academic institutions in a pioneering collaboration to speed early-stage drug discoveries into therapies for patients.

Despite tremendous advances in medical research in recent decades, the number of new treatments that become available to patients each year is stalled at historically low levels. All too often, promising ideas in the laboratory fall into the “Valley of Death,” a term drug developers use to refer to the

funding gap between basic discovery and clinical testing.

Now, in a pioneering collaboration, Memorial Sloan Kettering is partnering with [The Rockefeller University](#) and [Weill Cornell Medical College](#) to form the [Tri-Institutional Therapeutics Discovery Institute](#), Inc. (Tri-I TDI). The institute has been designed to accelerate early-stage drug discoveries into innovative treatments and therapies for patients with various diseases, including cancers.

Tri-I TDI will focus on the early stages of developing compounds through “proof-of-concept” studies that suggest that targeting a biologic pathway has potential to favorably alter the course of a disease. The institute has also engaged the Takeda Pharmaceutical Company as a first collaborator to help develop small molecule drugs.

The institute — a new model of academic-industrial collaboration — officially launched on October 1 and will select research projects that hold the greatest scientific promise and present the most innovative hypotheses. The participation of Takeda, a global pharmaceutical company based in Japan with a strong record of bringing new medicines to market, will benefit drug discovery work at the three academic institutions. Each scientist’s home institution will retain its intellectual property.

“Although great ideas in science often come from individual minds, the real doing of science requires community, collegiality, and the sharing of knowledge,” says Memorial Sloan Kettering President [Craig B. Thompson](#). “The Tri-Institutional Therapeutics Discovery Institute will combine our three academic institutions with our different resources and expertise to work in partnership with Takeda Pharmaceuticals to make the process of drug discovery and development more efficient.”

## A Novel Collaboration

Memorial Sloan Kettering has several existing collaborations with Weill Cornell Medical College and The Rockefeller University to advance basic biological research, foster stem cell research, and coordinate cancer research efforts. The Tri-I TDI is taking a novel approach by partnering with a pharmaceutical company, whose medicinal chemists and pharmacologists will be working alongside academic scientists from the earliest stages of drug development.

“This partnership is unique in bringing together three academic institutions to work in close collaboration with a pharmaceutical company,” says [David A. Scheinberg](#), Chair of Memorial Sloan Kettering’s Experimental Therapeutics Center. “This is not like previous relationships in which ideas were taken from academia and licensed to a company for development. This program brings the groups together to work as a team from the beginning.”

Tadataka Yamada, Director and Chief Medical and Scientific Officer of Takeda, said he learned valuable lessons during the time he headed the Global Health Division at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Among these was that “partnership is an easy word, but there’s an old African saying that if you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to travel far, walk together. True partnership involves equal sharing, without concern over profit, property, or recognition. In the Tri-I TDI, the rewards will go to groups of people who will work together as colleagues.

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## Diseases Both Common and Rare

The independent, nonprofit Tri-I TDI will reflect the myriad interests of the member institutions’ faculty and will bring together their diverse and complementary expertise and resources to address not only the world’s most deadly afflictions but also neglected or “orphan” diseases that affect small numbers of people and receive scant research funding.

“An exciting aspect of this program is that it will allow us to focus efforts on these very lethal diseases for the first time and get drug company involvement to develop therapies for them,” Dr. Scheinberg adds.

The Tri-I TDI’s initial focus, says Dr. Scheinberg, will be to develop small-molecule therapies for cancer, infectious disease, cardiovascular and metabolic disorders, inflammatory diseases, and neurodegenerative disorders. In the next several years, the program’s scope will expand to include monoclonal antibodies, which are increasingly being used for cancer, inflammation, and infectious diseases, and to begin making a new generation of molecular imaging agents to improve diagnosis.

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## A Philanthropic Bridge

Tri-I-TDI is made possible by a \$15 million gift from Lewis and Ali Sanders. “Historical sources of funding like the NIH [National Institutes of Health] are under budget constraints, which increases the need for a private philanthropist to step up to the plate and ensure that great innovation is appropriately financed,” Mr. Sanders says. “This invests in intellectual capital that has the promise of really changing the game.”

“Drug companies typically won’t fund ideas because of the risk they involve until they reach the point where they’re ready for human trials,” Dr. Scheinberg adds. “The US government, through the NIH, has not funded such research, and although in the past venture capitalists have funded high-risk ventures such as this, that has become increasingly difficult to obtain. To bridge the gap between an idea and the drug in the human being, we have had to rely increasingly on philanthropic sources of funding.”

Dr. Yamada emphasized that the ultimate test of Tri-I TDI’s success will be how many lives are improved as a result of the collaboration. “I’ve worked for somebody who was a tennis player, and he used to say, ‘If you’re not keeping score, you’re just practicing.’ This institution can’t just be practicing. It has to keep score — not by NIH grants obtained, not in publications, promotions, or awards. It’s going to be measured in medicines that change the lives of people.”

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