

Steve Wynn: University on path to blindness cure

October 19 2013, by Ryan J. Foley



Las Vegas casino tycoon Steve Wynn, center, speaks with University of Iowa's Jean Robilliard in Iowa City, Iowa, on Friday, Oct. 18, 2013. Wynn was at the university for an event celebrating the new Stephen A. Wynn Institute for Vision Research, which received a \$25 million donation from the chairman of Wynn Resorts Ltd. (AP Photo/Ryan J. Foley)

Las Vegas casino tycoon Steve Wynn said Friday that he gave \$25

million to support blindness research at the University of Iowa after becoming convinced that its scientists were leading the way in the search for a cure.

Wynn, 71, said that university researchers were "knocking on the door" of a discovery that was unthinkable when he was diagnosed with a rare eye defect when he was in his 20s. He said there was no hope then for individuals inflicted with diseases such as retinitis pigmentosa, which has slowly compromised Wynn's [vision](#) and causes nighttime blindness and a lack of peripheral vision.

Today, he believes it is possible that within his lifetime, scientists will be able to use stem [cells](#) to restore vision by growing new cells that are not defective and transplanting them into patient's eyes. He spoke with amazement as he described how Iowa researchers have learned how to grow the cells and are testing them on mice, some of whom have been implanted with Wynn's cells.

"This is an exhilarating, quite exciting place. To a scientist, this is like going to a rock concert," Wynn, the chairman of Wynn Resorts Ltd., told The Associated Press. "I mean there is stuff going on in these rooms here that, to put it in the common vernacular, is really far out."

Wynn spoke in an interview after hundreds gathered at the university for an event celebrating the Stephen A. Wynn Institute for Vision Research, which was renamed to honor the \$25 million gift announced by Wynn in August. The money will help the institute build a new laboratory to grow [stem cells](#), hire more scientists and accelerate studies already underway.



This photo shows the Stephen A. Wynn Institute for Vision Research on the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City, Iowa, on Friday, Oct. 18, 2013. The university named the institute after Las Vegas casino tycoon Steve Wynn to honor Wynn's \$25 million donation, which will be used to accelerate work toward preventing and curing blindness. (AP Photo/Ryan J. Foley)

Wynn had few prior ties to Iowa, and Friday marked the first of what he said would be many visits to the campus. He credited his longtime business partner and director of his charitable foundation, Steven Dezii, with following research developments over the past 20 years and helping convince him that Iowa could make the best use of a sizeable donation.

He said the cutting-edge research makes his business pursuits feel mundane in comparison.

"The rest of the world is waiting with bated breath for the kind of work you're doing," he said. "To help keep the lights on in this institute has now become synonymous with keeping the lights on in people's eyes."

Dezii said he was impressed that the university was seeking to develop both gene and stem cell therapies for patients when most laboratories focus on one or the other. He said the university's multidisciplinary approach, involving everyone from biologists to surgeons to engineers, was also groundbreaking.

Wynn, who has hotels and casinos that bear his name around the world, joked that, "Having your name on a sign is a cool thing." He later made clear that it was the [university](#)'s idea to have the institute bear his name as a way to bring positive attention and motivate other donors.



Steve Wynn, center, poses for a picture with his wife, Andrea Hissom, left, and a

supporter at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, on Friday, Oct. 18, 2013. Wynn was at the university for a ceremony marking the naming of the Stephen A. Wynn Institute for Vision Research, which has received a \$25 million donation from the chairman of Wynn Resorts Ltd. (AP Photo/Ryan J. Foley)

Wynn noted that federal money for research has been tight in recent years and private donors are needed more than ever. He said he wasn't making the gift to help himself, saying he has been blessed with good care and a slow-progressing form of the disease.

At the same, he said he could see himself coming one day to have his [photoreceptor cells](#) replaced to restore his vision.

"They've got my cells in the mice!" he said. "There's 100 mice here that had my retinal cells and they are running around."

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Citation: Steve Wynn: University on path to blindness cure (2013, October 19) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-steve-wynn-university-path.html>

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