

Tech billionaire donates \$250 mn for cancer 'moonshot' (Update)

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Tech billionaire Sean Parker announced a \$250 million grant on Wednesday to fund research aimed at breakthroughs in cancer treatment through immunotherapy.

Parker, the founder of music-sharing service Napster and an early investor and executive at Facebook, will create a center for immunotherapy—which aims to use the body's immune system to fight the disease—collaborating with six US-based cancer research institutions.

"We are at an inflection point in cancer research and now is the time to maximize immunotherapy's unique potential to transform all cancers into manageable diseases, saving millions of lives," said Parker, who last year created the Parker Foundation.

"We believe that the creation of a new funding and research model can overcome many of the obstacles that currently prevent research breakthroughs. Working closely with our scientists and more than 30 industry partners, the Parker Institute is positioned to broadly disseminate discoveries and, most importantly, more rapidly deliver treatments to patients."

Parker, 36, and his wife Alexandra marked the launch with a glittering gala dinner at their \$50 million, nine-bedroom Beverly Hills mansion, bought from comedian and presenter Ellen DeGeneres in 2014.

Stars including Tom Hanks, Katy Perry, Orlando Bloom, Sean Penn and Bradley Cooper attended alongside tech industry leaders such as Jack Dorsey of Twitter, Anne Wojcicki of Google and Laurene Jobs, widow of Steve Jobs.

'Game-changer'

"The common understanding is that all these people have always worked together and anybody who works on cancer is happy to share all their research and help each other out," said Hanks, 59, whose wife, the actress and singer Rita Wilson, underwent a double mastectomy last year.

"It's the opposite of that because there's intellectual property, there's grant money involved. So (Parker) is bringing a level of common sense that you would have thought had already existed but didn't."

Wilson, also 59, praised Parker for being a rich young man who could do anything with his fortunes but had chosen instead to go about curing cancer "by thinking outside the box."

"I think about all the women or men... who are going through all sorts of different kinds of cancers right now and something like immunotherapy will be a life-changer and a game-changer for those people," she said.

Almost 600,000 Americans are expected to die of cancer in 2016, according to the American Cancer Society. That translates to more than 1,600 people a day.

It is the second most common cause of death in the United States, exceeded only by heart disease, and accounts for nearly one of every four deaths.

'Leaders in the field

The new Parker Institute for Cancer Immunotherapy will work with over 40 laboratories and more than 300 researchers and immunologists. All the research and intellectual property will be shared, "enabling all researchers to have immediate access to a broad swath of core discoveries," according to a statement.

"Immunotherapy is the closest we've ever come to what that magical so-called cure for cancer may look like," said Peter Jackson, 54, director of fantasy trilogies "The Lord of the Rings" and "The Hobbit."

The center will be headed by University of California-San Francisco scientist Jeffrey Bluestone, who was named to a panel to help guide the "moonshot" cancer initiative announced this year by Vice President Joe Biden.

"Immunotherapy represents a fundamentally new, breakthrough treatment paradigm in the fight against cancer. It harnesses the body's own powerful immune system to mobilize its highly refined disease-fighting arsenal to engage and eliminate the cancer cells," Bluestone said.

"Our scientists are leaders in the field and will now work together to make discoveries to treat and potentially cure cancer."

Bluestone was the founder and served for 10 years as director of the Immune Tolerance Network, a multicenter clinical immunology research program.

Partners in the project in addition to UCSF include the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Stanford Medicine, UCLA, the University of Pennsylvania and The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

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