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Healthy New Jobs

by Ted S. McGregor Jr.

Smoking may be good for Spokane. That might seem like an odd way to start out a column about the future of health care, research and the economy of the region, but it's looking like it may become a fact.

It all started back in the 1990s, when 46 states jumped into the void of responsibility abdicated by Congress and sued the nation's tobacco companies. They charged them with downplaying the risks of smoking while they glamorized the look of a cigarette dangling from your lip. Remember Joe Camel? A lot of people thought that guy was cool. A jury didn't agree, and the industry was hit with a \$200 billion settlement.

Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire, then the state's attorney general, was one of the lead attorneys on the case. Somewhere along the way, she came up with a plan for how to spend some of that money. Her idea became a campaign promise and, just last year, was enacted into law.

Starting in 2008, Washington's Life Sciences Discovery Fund will start handing out \$35 million a year for a decade. Washington-based research institutions that are working to solve some of the most persistent questions in medicine will be at the top of the list to receive funds. A secondary goal of the LSDF is to help with economic development, as advances in health care add new companies and jobs — two items at the top of Spokane's to-do list.

By now, you're probably thinking, "Great, one more way to give our money to a bunch of Seattleites." Well, it's true that Seattle is home to the 800-pound gorilla of regional research, the University of Washington, and a handful of other institutions. In fact, the National Institutes of Health funds Seattle-area research to the tune of \$400 million a year.

But here's where a new, relatively unknown, Spokane-based outfit comes in. The Institute for Systems Medicine is trying to get a running start at competing alongside the Seattle big boys for a slice of that LSDF pie. ISM is poised to become a very powerful piston in the local economy's engine.

ISM's Chief Operating Officer Lewis Rumpler predicts that within four years, if all the pieces fall into place, the Institute will have 20 faculty positions, with research staff, adding up to 250 high-paying jobs. In 2002, Phoenix got behind a similar effort; today, TGen boasts 200 employees, and a number of spin-off companies are starting to pop up. The message, as Rumpler sees it, is that it can be done, and other cities are doing it. "It's a perishable idea," he told Suzanne Schreiner, editor of our sister publication, InHealthNW. (You can read more about it in the current edition of our free health magazine.)

Rumpler says Spokane is perfectly situated for a research institution for a couple of reasons. First, is the proximity of so many hospitals and clinics. "You can't study disease without

disease," Rumpler says, meaning future research will be made easier with the ready availability of clinical studies via local populations.

Another reason is our quality of life. A big part of the research game is recruiting those smart people who are dreaming up the next big things in health care. These people are in high demand, so they tend to be picky. Along with a competitive salary package, they're looking for a nice place to live, with good schools, proximity to outdoor recreation, a good arts scene — all areas Spokane competes very well on.

Lisa Shaffer is a good example. A full professor at the Baylor College of Medicine, she and her husband Jeff settled on relocating to Spokane after the crush of Houston started to weigh on them. Now they live on 60 acres in north Spokane, with their kids in the Mead School District. Recruited to WSU Spokane, she has a faculty spot and has since co-founded Signature Genomics, a firm that specializes in cutting-edge genetic testing. Hopefully, her story will become more typical.

In fact, Spokane could become known as a center for studying genetics. Michael Skinner, a faculty member of WSU's molecular biosciences department in Pullman, is a national leader in the emerging field known as epigenetics. He's also ISM's senior scientific advisor. Already, ISM has won a \$500,000 federal grant for the study of epigenetics, and Rumpler sees the field as a perfect hook to hang Spokane's high-tech hat on. Not only does epigenetics have the potential to profoundly change health care, but it is also so new that no other research institute is focusing on it — yet.

Skinner's groundbreaking research suggests that some diseases — maybe a lot of them — are caused when DNA sequences get messed up, perhaps by a chemical your grandmother was exposed to when she was pregnant with your father. If those broken codes could be identified and fixed — and here's where it gets a little science fiction — sick people could be cured without conventional methods. To start, Skinner believes a better understanding of how disease develops is needed. Which brings us back to all those patients in all the hospitals in and around Spokane.

Rumpler says ISM needs to come up with \$30 million a year to operate. He knows the competition will be stiff, but ISM will be applying for funding from the LSDF. (And Senate Majority Leader Lisa Brown, an LSDF board member, may just remind her colleagues that Eastern Washington is, in fact, part of Washington state.) ISM is also considering applying to the Gates Foundation, which has a special mission to eradicate disease, along with other charitable organizations.

Plans for economic development have come and gone for Spokane. The city and region have spent decades trying to figure out where things should go after the decline of natural resource extraction. Health care seems to be the obvious choice, as an impressive infrastructure is already in place. Now, with WSU and other academic institutions, along with the state's new LSDF, getting into the act, it all seems to be coming together.

If Spokane wants to back efforts that will give this region an economic shot in the arm, this one's a no-brainer. Let's get behind the Institute for Systems Medicine.

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