

Philanthropy Profile

The V Foundation's Efforts to Support Cancer Research

Cancer therapies have improved remarkably in recent decades, thanks to the ongoing work of dedicated researchers worldwide. As the home of several strong research programs—including the Duke Cancer Institute, the Comprehensive Cancer Center of Wake Forest University, and the Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of North Carolina (UNC)—North Carolina remains an active hub for this research, in part due to the funding of various philanthropic organizations.

One of these organizations is The V Foundation for Cancer Research, which was founded by ESPN and Jim Valvano, the men's head basketball coach at NC State University from 1980 to 1990. In 1993 Valvano announced that he would be partnering with ESPN to start a foundation with a mission to find cures for cancer through supporting the most promising cancer research. Valvano had been diagnosed with cancer at the age of 46 years, and he died soon after his announcement. Nevertheless, through the support of his friends, family, and the nation, The V Foundation has made significant contributions to the field of cancer research over the past 20 years. From 1994 to 2013, The V Foundation awarded \$115 million in grants to cancer research, \$13 million of which was awarded to cancer researchers in North Carolina.

The V Foundation's Unique Philanthropic Model

Unlike other cancer advocacy organizations and foundations, The V Foundation awards 100% of direct cash donations to cancer research. Thanks to an endowment that covers all operating expenses, The V Foundation is able to use donations for the intended purpose of furthering cancer research. In addition, The V Foundation has chosen to fund cancer research across all organ types. This strategy not only allows for the flexibility to fund preeminent research regardless of organ type, but it also furthers research among cancer types that are traditionally less well funded. Finally, The V Foundation allows only 1 applicant per institution for its V Scholar and Translational grants. This policy encourages institutions to have an

internal competition to determine which grant applications should be submitted; thus the review committee considers only the leading research from any given institution.

All of the submitted grant applications are reviewed by The V Foundation's Scientific Advisory Committee, which is comprised of national leaders in medicine and science who specialize in major areas of cancer research. This committee also has 2 lay community members who participate in the grant selection process. These members were recommended to The V Foundation for their personal experience with cancer and/or their advocacy efforts in the field.

The V Foundation awards 3 types of grants: V Scholar grants, Translational grants, and Designated grants. V Scholar grants were established to meet the initial vision of the organization, which was to support promising young researchers and to help them establish their careers. (Now more than ever, when larger funding streams such as the National Institutes of Health have been stagnating, V Scholar grants provide a means for young researchers to establish themselves so that they can qualify for larger grants in the future.) Translational grants are intended to accelerate the process of bringing research from the laboratory to the patient. Finally, Designated grants are inspired by particular areas of scientific interest and/or geographic reach. They are selected on the basis of scientific merit as determined by the Scientific Advisory Committee.

Recent Grant Recipients in North Carolina

Gang "Greg" Wang, PhD, a researcher at the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center, is a recent V Scholar grant recipient. Wang's research focuses on DNA-modifying enzymes that are often abnormally

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expressed, mutated, and/or hyperactivated among various forms of blood malignancies. His research specifically focuses on mutations in a gene that encodes an enzyme that accounts for 10%-20% of certain types of lymphomas. By identifying the relationship between this gene and other biochemicals, Wang has been able to identify key interacting factors that could respond to pharmacological manipulation.

Another V Foundation award recipient is Kim Rathmell, MD, PhD, who is a researcher at the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center. She recently received a Translational grant for her research regarding mutations that affect DNA packaging in clear cell renal cell carcinoma (ccRCC). Her 3-part project aims to understand the global impact of these mutations on the way DNA is organized in affected tumors, to explore how changes promote cancer growth, and to test drugs to selectively kill cancer cells that harbor these changes. In the first year of research, Rathmell's team discovered that tumors with mutations in a key gene have DNA that is unwound across large portions of the genome, which allows for activation of many target genes associated with ccRCC.

Finally, John Cavanagh, PhD, was recently awarded a V Foundation Designated grant for his work with the Jimmy V-NC State Cancer Therapeutics Training Program. This program,

which is based at NC State University, supports young researchers from high school through undergraduate who work in various cancer research laboratories. Researchers in this program discovered a class of molecules with antibacterial properties that appear to enhance the effects of novel anticancer agents. To follow up on this discovery, more than 1,000 molecules are now being screened in combination with anticancer agents to determine their effectiveness in various cancer cell lines.

The V Foundation's Impact in North Carolina

Since its inception, The V Foundation has awarded 54 grants to researchers in North Carolina. These grants have supported promising young researchers and have allowed for preeminent research to transition more quickly from the lab to the bedside. Although The V Foundation supports cancer research nationwide, North Carolina's cancer research institutions have remained competitive in securing these grants. Moving forward, The V Foundation is identifying areas of cancer research that are in need of additional funding, including research focused on the immune system and research related to pediatric cancer. Additionally, The V Foundation is looking to allocate more resources towards understanding how bioinformatics can inform biomedical research. **NCMJ**