For reprint orders, please contact: reprints@futuremedicine.com

California: 'the Stem Cell State'

Interview with Jonathan Thomas

We talked to Jonathan Thomas, newly elected Chairman of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM), a few weeks into a role he describes as “the opportunity of the lifetime” to find out what he sees as the key goals for the CIRM and why patient advocates are so critical to the future of the Institute.

What attracted you to the role of CIRM Chair?

I have always been interested in the biological sciences. I came up through college as a Biology Major and pre-med student at Yale (CT, USA) back in the mid-1970s. About the time I graduated Genentech was just gearing up. I watched their development with great interest and have tracked the bioscience business for many years now. Although I ended up getting a law degree and have been working in law or finance for the last 30 years, I have kept my eye very closely on bioscience and looked for an opportunity to get back into it if the right job arose. This is that job. Back in 2004, when Proposition 71 passed, I followed the election with great interest and have continued to follow the progress of the Institute since that time. On one of my periodic visits to the website in December, I noticed that Bob Klein was coming to the end of his tenure. That set off a string of events that ultimately led to my election in June. I am delighted to be here. This is the opportunity of a lifetime to contribute to something that could result in huge health benefits for patients in California, the USA

Jonathan Thomas was elected as Chairman of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM) in June 2011, succeeding the Founder and former Chairman, Bob Klein. Thomas has had a successful career in finance and law and is a Co-Founding Partner at Saybrook Capital, an investment banking and private equity firm. His commitment to patient advocacy and keen interest in biological sciences, developed as a Biology Major at Yale, led him to stand for Chairman.

and the world through the research being carried out by the extraordinary scientists whom we fund.

What do you personally hope to bring to the role?

Of course, nobody replaces Bob Klein. When the annals of medicine for this era are written decades from now, Bob will feature prominently. The

“ This is the opportunity of a lifetime to contribute to something that could result in huge health benefits for patients in California, the USA and the world through the research being carried out by the extraordinary scientists whom we fund. ”

benefits of the CIRM to patients, to the biotechnology industry in California, to the California research institutions pursuing stem cell cures and to the State will be pronounced. All that will trace back to Bob and his original vision. I am delighted to have the chance to build on the extraordinary work that Bob and our hardworking board and staff have accomplished over the last 6.5 years. I think there are many things that I can do to contribute to the continued success of the Institute.

The issue of funding is a major priority. We are in very dicey economic times, both in California and nationally, that could prove problematic for CIRM's cash flow needs. While we have our funding fully authorized through Proposition 71, many issues could come up with respect to the timing and size of the State's General Obligation bond issues over the course of the next few years. I want to make sure that we do not run into any such problems going forward. The financial issues are key; everything follows from having money available.

It is my intention to conduct a robust public communications effort to make sure that everybody hears about the great work that we are doing. That includes the constitutional officers, the members of the legislature and their staff and last, but certainly not least, the members of the public who are paying for the work that is being done here. They all have a right to be fully up to speed on our progress. We have a great story to tell and we need to tell it and re-tell it to make sure that we get our point across. If we do not tell it, there are those who will tell our story for us and may not accurately depict the facts. California is now the leading

funding source for stem cell research in the world. We would like people to think about California as the 'Stem Cell State'. It is my intention to get across the message that stem cell research is California's next Silicon Valley.

“ The financial issues are key; everything follows from having money available. ”

Another major aspect I plan to focus on is to ensure that there is a well-defined path to regulatory approval with the US FDA with respect to stem cell research. That path is still not fully defined at this point, creating difficulties for researchers looking to get their basic research through to clinical trials. I want to work with our president Alan Trounson, our scientific staff and other stakeholders to present a coordinated front to get regulatory pathway certainty as soon as possible.

We intend to markedly increase the role of industry in the CIRM program. To date, industry has received relatively little funding from the Institute. Biotechnology companies are going to be critical in all sorts of ways to our funded projects, both as partners in the development of the products but also in the financing for these projects. Their engagement is going to be a big part of our work as well.

Lastly, we are fortunate to have Senator Art Torres (Ret.) and Duane Roth as our Vice Chairs. Both have done a great job in dealing with political issues at the state or federal level. I have a lot

of experience working with government officials at all levels and will look to help Art and Duane in their continued efforts to make sure that no political issues affect us adversely going forward.

How has the CIRM been affected by the global economic downturn, which has hit California hard?

Under the terms of Proposition 71, the Institute's funding is insulated from the larger problems that have developed over the last few years. That fact drives home the point of how important it is to have a discrete, established funding source for our work. We are able to continue funding our projects and working towards cures even though there are major budgetary issues, both at the state and federal level. It is important to note that CIRM has already had major economic benefits to the state in the form of the thousands of construction and research jobs created through our funding. We have undertaken a number of economic analyses showing that we will be returning over US\$200 million to the state coffers by 2014, so we believe that we are going to be a real economic plus. If we achieve our aim of providing cures for any number of currently incurable diseases, we will have a huge impact on the economy of the state and beyond by materially reducing healthcare costs.

What do you think has been the most exciting development by CIRM-funded researchers over the past year?

We have 14 funded disease teams pursuing research on a number of fronts. I believe that they have all significantly advanced in their work. For example, the team led by Mark Humayun and David

“ We would like people to think about California as the 'Stem Cell State'. It is my intention to get across the message that stem cell research is California's next Silicon Valley. ”

Hinton at the University of Southern California, along with Pete Coffey at the University of London, are working on a potential cure for age-related macular degeneration. They have shown real progress in their work. If they get to their ultimate goal of curing blindness in these patients, that would obviously have a huge impact. We also have individual projects outside of the disease teams that have shown real promise. Catriona Jamieson's work at University of California, San Diego on the blood disorder polycythemia vera is in clinical trials and showing early signs of efficacy, which is a very exciting development. These are a small sampling of the exciting projects currently underway using CIRM funding. We are optimistic that we will achieve very positive results in a number of areas.

How important are patient advocates in driving stem cell research forward in the USA?

I think patient advocates are absolutely critical. They are the whole reason that Proposition 71 was passed to begin with. Everything that we do has the goal of alleviating patients' suffering. They are our most compelling public face. As I mentioned, we plan on having a very aggressive public communications campaign. Patient advocates will

be front and center in that effort. Nobody can deliver the message on the importance of CIRM-funded projects as effectively or as compellingly as they can. We are also very mindful of the considerable role that patient advocates play on the board here at the CIRM. One of my goals is to figure out how they can play an even larger role on a variety of fronts within the Institute going forward.

This focus on patient advocacy is one reason we are extremely excited to have the World Stem Cell Summit in California this year. The Summit has always brought patient advocates together with policy makers, funders, scientists and other stakeholders, and it is a great way to further integrate the patient advocates into the entire process.

Financial & competing interests disclosure

The author has no relevant affiliations or financial involvement with any organization or entity with a financial interest in or financial conflict with the subject matter or materials discussed in the manuscript. This includes employment, consultancies, honoraria, stock ownership or options, expert testimony, grants or patents received or pending, or royalties.

No writing assistance was utilized in the production of this manuscript.

Jonathan Thomas, California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, 210 King Street, San Francisco, CA 94107, USA; jthomas@cirm.ca.gov