

Dal-Harvard partnership is a real no-brainer

Universities to work together on brain repair

By JOHN GILLIS
Health Reporter

The links between Halifax and Boston include Christmas trees, baseball heroes and now the quest to repair brains.

The heads of Dalhousie University's Brain Repair Centre and Harvard University's Center for Neuroregeneration Research signed an agreement Wednesday to formalize a collaboration between two East Coast facilities known around the world for their innovation.

"It's a no-brainer," Halifax neurosurgeon Dr. Ivar Mendez said after the ceremony at Dal. "They have an expertise that is complementary to ours. Together, we will be able to move farther and faster in terms of the goal of repairing the brain."

Dr. Mendez and Dr. Ole Isacson, director of the neuroregeneration centre at Harvard's McLean Hospital, heaped praise on each other's work. The two centres have been working together for five years.

"I have to compete with Europeans who want to take Ivar's time for collaborations," Dr. Isacson said.

Dr. Harold Cook, dean of Dalhousie's medical school, said geography, the historical relationship between Boston and Halifax and the shared goals of the two centres make for a natural partnership.

"This is an example where the borders break down, and we just get down to business," he said.

Dr. Isacson said researchers at the Harvard centre have developed ways of producing the cells that die in Parkinson's disease from a dish of stem cells, and may even be able to transplant a patient's own skin cells into the brain to reverse the effects of the disease.

Dr. Mendez said this approach could provide a road map for the treatment of other neurological diseases or damage to the brain caused by stroke and injury.



Dr. Ivar Mendez, chairman of Dalhousie University's Brain Repair Centre, shakes hands with Dr. Ole Isacson, director of the neuroregeneration centre at Harvard's McLean Hospital, during a news conference on Wednesday in Halifax. (TIM KROCHAK / Staff)

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By working together more closely, the two teams may fundamentally change how medicine tackles what are now life-altering conditions, Dr. Isacson said.

"We're certainly talking within a

decade to change the very nature of treatment of these diseases, perhaps away from some drug treatments to real surgical applications with cell implantations or even regeneration of brain connections," he said.

Dr. Isacson noted that the two centres will be able to tap separate American and Canadian sources of funding as they pursue separate goals.

He said his Boston facility uses Dal-designed equipment that is at the forefront of neurosurgery technology. He said Harvard's links to the scientific community could help put such tools into wider use.

Many people will benefit, Dr. Mendez said.

"At the end of the day, what we want is to provide not only patients in Nova Scotia and Boston, but the patients of the world with world-class care—the best type of medical care possible."

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