

Philanthropy

Why He Made the Biggest Gift

In what constitutes the largest gift ever made to the School of Medicine, Jan T. Vilcek, M.D., Ph.D., Professor of Microbiology, has made a pledge estimated to be worth \$105 million for the support of the basic sciences. The source of this extraordinary gift—perhaps the largest from an active faculty member to any academic medical center—is the

royalties from Remicade, a potent anti-inflammatory agent used to treat rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, and psoriatic arthritis. Dr. Vilcek and his colleague, Adjunct Associate Professor of Microbiology Junming Le, Ph.D., developed the monoclonal antibody that is the basis for the drug.

Dr. Vilcek was born in Bratislava, Slovakia (then Czechoslovakia). He received his M.D. from the Comenius University Medical School in Bratislava, and his Ph.D. from the Institute of Virology, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. In 1965 he joined the faculty of the School of Medicine as an Assistant Professor of Microbiology. His entire career has been devoted to the study of molecules that regulate the immune system, including interferon and tumor necrosis factor (TNF). In May Dr. Vilcek was awarded the Albert Gallatin Medal, the University's highest honor. NYU *PHYSICIAN* met with Dr. Vilcek recently to discuss his life and work.

REMICADE HAS BEEN USED BY MORE THAN 600,000 PATIENTS WORLD-WIDE. DID YOU EVER EXPECT YOUR WORK TO HAVE SUCH A PROFOUND IMPACT ON PATIENT CARE?

We were always hoping that our work would lead to something useful, but not even in our most optimistic expectations did we think that Remicade would be so widely used.

HOW DID YOUR WORK WITH REMICADE COME ABOUT?

We had been working for a long time on interferons, natural proteins that inhibit viral replication. While producing interferon gamma from activated human lymphocytes in the early 1980s, we detected the presence of another biologically active factor. Subsequently, we identified this new factor as TNF [an inflammatory protein]. The protein was not purified and isolated until the mid-1980s. When we became interested in TNF, it was still more of a concept than scientific reality.

Nevertheless, we had a notion that antibodies to interferon and TNF could be medically useful. So in 1984 we proposed to the biotechnology company Centocor to make monoclonal antibodies to interferon and TNF. The monoclonal antibody to TNF made here at NYU became the basis for Remicade. It took 14 years to develop and test the drug, which was approved by the FDA in 1998.

DO YOU FEEL THAT SCIENTISTS HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO GIVE BACK TO THEIR INSTITUTIONS?

I wouldn't characterize it as an obligation. I think you have to decide for yourself whether supporting your university is something you wish to do. In my case, I am giving back to the university a portion of what it has given me over the years. When I came here



Jan T. Vilcek, M.D., Ph.D.

as an immigrant from Czechoslovakia, NYU had the courage to offer me a faculty position. I had never written a grant proposal, and they took a gamble on me. Fortunately, I soon was able to get my grant support, and the gamble paid off. But to this day I remain grateful to NYU for giving me the opportunity to develop my research program. I view my gift as a prudent investment in the future of biomedical science at NYU School of Medicine. I want more talented young medical scientists to be able to join NYU and develop their careers here as I did 40 years ago.

HAS WEALTH CHANGED YOUR LIFE?

My basic lifestyle hasn't changed. Of course, I can be a little more generous to myself and my family and friends. My wife is an art historian, and she and I were always interested in art. We now devote more time and resources to our artistic pursuits.

CAN YOU PURSUE ANY PROJECT NOW?

Indeed, my colleagues and I can use a portion of the Remicade revenues for our own research. It alleviates some of the worries that every research scientist has about funding these days. ■