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## MEDIA RELEASE

# SFU scientists awarded \$3M for Alzheimer's research

November 21, 2014

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The British Columbia Alzheimer's Research Award Program has awarded two research teams led by [Simon Fraser University](#) scientists \$1.5 million each to help find solutions to Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, which affect as many as 70,000 people in the province.

The money is from a \$7.5-million fund created last year by a new partnership including [Brain Canada](#), the [Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research](#), [Genome British Columbia](#) and the [Pacific Alzheimer Research Foundation](#).

The first team, led by SFU chemical biologist professor David Vocadlo, will address several key challenges. These include synthesizing optimized compounds that target a recently identified pathway implicated in Alzheimer's disease, and identifying suitable biomarkers that could be used in humans to test these compounds. Addressing these challenges will facilitate downstream toxicology studies and clinical trials.

The second team, led by SFU biomedical engineer and engineering professor Faisal Beg, will develop a new retina-imaging device that uses laser light to detect the earliest signs of amyloid in the retina, which may be indicative of Alzheimer's. It could lead to an inexpensive, non-invasive and widely deployable retina exam for screening individuals on a regular basis.

Vocadlo's multi-institutional group includes SFU chemist Robert Britton, neuroscientist Michael Silverman and biochemist Sharon Gorski, as well as University of British Columbia researchers including neurologists Howard Feldman and Ging-Yuek Hsiung, neuropathologists Ian Mackenzie and Cheryl Wellington and biochemist Leonard Foster. It also includes international members from the New York State Institute for Basic Research and the U.K.'s University of York.

"It's a superb multidisciplinary team," says Vocadlo, a celebrated scientist whose carbohydrate chemistry and biochemistry research is helping to transform our understanding of the crucial role complex sugar-processing enzymes play in diseases such as Alzheimer's and cancer.

"Together, we hope to push this therapeutic target toward the clinic by identifying new potent compounds, working out how these compounds are acting and identifying biomarkers that can be used in eventual human clinical trials to ensure that we are having the desired effects within the brain."

Beg's team includes SFU engineering scientist Marinko Sarunic, computing scientist Greg Mori and actuarial scientist Jinko Graham, as well as UBC ophthalmologists Andrew Merkur and Paul Mackenzie and vision scientist, Joanne Matsubara, along with Hsiung and Mackenzie (from Vocadlo's group), and McGill University neuroscientist Alan Evans.

"Detecting the beginning of Alzheimer's in an individual's brain in the early stages is difficult as the changes in behavior are subtle and hidden," says Beg, who has shared his innovative computational tools for brain image analysis with colleagues worldwide.

“Proper diagnosis is the key to successful treatment,” he adds. “Families’ lives are turned upside down by this disease, and I hope our research will help to make a difference.”

Three projects led by UBC scientists also received \$1.5 million each from the Alzheimer’s research fund.

“We have many talented researchers at SFU and in British Columbia who are contributing to the global understanding of Alzheimer’s disease, but its prevention and cure still eludes us,” says SFU Vice President, Research, Joy Johnson.

“By leading synergistic teams of experts across institutions, we aim to spark breakthrough thinking that will ultimately lead to more effective methods for the early detection and treatment of this disease.”

As Canada's engaged university, SFU is defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research and far-reaching community engagement. SFU was founded almost 50 years ago with a mission to be a different kind of university—to bring an interdisciplinary approach to learning, embrace bold initiatives, and engage with communities near and far. Today, SFU is a leader amongst Canada's comprehensive research universities and is ranked one of the top universities in the world under 50 years of age. With campuses in British Columbia's three largest cities—Vancouver, Surrey and Burnaby—SFU has eight faculties, delivers almost 150 programs to over 30,000 students, and boasts more than 130,000 alumni in 130 countries around the world.

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