KU Increases Autism Research

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A $1 million grant provided the operating base, but a burgeoning number of autism diagnoses provided the call for a new research center at Kansas University. Steve Warren, director of KU's Life Span Institute and the new vice provost for research, said autism diagnoses in the past 20 years have increased significantly. About 1 in 150 children are believed to have autism now.

"Autism is more common than all other childhood diseases combined," Warren said. "And it's a complicated disability. We don't know nearly as much about it as we should." With that in mind, the Life Span Institute is preparing to launch a new center dedicated to research on the causes and treatments of autism. The institute's 13th center will get a funding boost from a recently announced $1 million donation.

The donation was given by the estate of Wanda and Thomas Pyle, of Elmdale. Warren said the donation would give the center a long-term source of base funding. "We'd love to get more of those," Warren said. "We didn't expect that at all. As we do more research, there will be more people like that."

Warren said KU developed some of the most important autism research as much as 50 years ago. However, there has not been much progress in intervening years. "By creating the center, we can have a greater impact on the world," Warren said. "But we'll have an emphasis on treatment locally and around the state. We'll focus on both cause and treatment, as well as have some clinical and education work."

Warren said he expects the new center - a joint effort of KU's Lawrence campus and the medical center in Kansas City, Kan. - to grow to a modest size quickly and gradually grow as grants and contracts are awarded by governments and nonprofits.

Debra Kamps, a senior researcher at KU, has led the task force that is developing the model for this new center. Kamps has been researching autism for more than 25 years.

"We're working out our administrative structure, our organizational activities and we're working on our mission statement," Kamps said. "We're trying to determine what we want to do."

Kamps said the preliminary reaction from parents has been excellent, with meetings and seminars already seeing overflow crowds.

"We're trying to really get a handle on what the parents feel KU can do to help with the needs of their children with autism," Kamps said.

Ultimately, Kamps expects the research center will help provide more trained individuals in the community to work with people with autism. "My sense in attending several meetings is there are so many families in this community and so many people who are making strong commitments, but we're missing a core group to help foster communications and partnerships," Kamps said. "This center will be a way to bring people together."