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Tuesday, March 18, 2008

Medical school chooses leader for its new gene therapy center

By Elizabeth Cooney TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
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WORCESTER— The University of Massachusetts Medical School yesterday named the leader of the first component in its ambitious three-part advanced therapeutics cluster.

Guangping Gao, 50, a researcher from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, will become founding director of the Gene Therapy Center at the state's medical school. Dr. Gao, who starts March 31, will also direct the UMass Medical School — China Translational Research Initiative, a collaboration with Tsinghua University in Beijing to develop new drugs and medical devices.

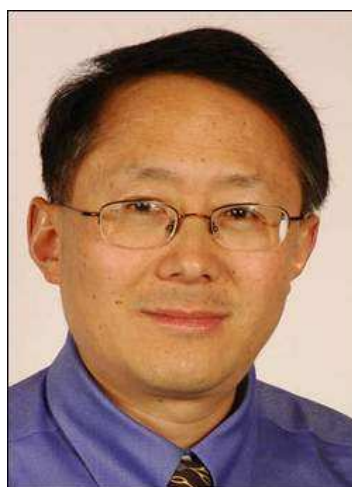
The other two parts of the UMass cluster will focus on RNA interference therapeutics and on stem cell biology. The research efforts have been championed by Gov. Deval L. Patrick in his \$1 billion life sciences proposal.

Medical school dean Dr. Terence R. Flotte said that while legislation being considered on Beacon Hill is important to fund construction of a building to house the cluster, the programs are going forward independently. The building, to be named for medical school vice chancellor Albert Sherman, is slated for completion by the end of 2011.

"The legislation deals more with the scaling of construction for the project, but our commitment to all parts of the program is firm," he said. "We are operating from an optimistic perspective."

The Gene Therapy Center — including Dr. Flotte's own lab investigating such genetic diseases as cystic fibrosis — is opening in renovated space in Biotech Five, across Plantation Street from the school.

Dr. Gao, who earned his doctorate in biomedical sciences from Florida International University, is an expert in adeno-associated viruses, the vectors that are harnessed to deliver modified genes and other genetic material into human cells in order to treat disease.



Dr. Gao
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