

For immediate release:

Family recognized for innovative approach to childhood cancer research

Toronto, ON (Tuesday, November 13, 2007) – The impact of a family’s efforts to cure a deadly childhood cancer is being recognized today with the naming of a cancer research lab in their son’s honour. *The James Birrell Laboratories* at SickKids Research Institute recognizes the impact of eight-year-old James Birrell to the world of neuroblastoma research.

In an effort to beat the clock and find an effective treatment and cure for James, Syd and Pam Birrell started The James Fund for Neuroblastoma Research at SickKids. They have rallied the community and families from around the world, raising \$2 million in six years and translating donor dollars into high impact research. To date, there are 10 research projects underway, five full-time research salaries funded and 17 peer reviewed articles published.

James lost his fight with cancer in December 2001 but the family continues to push for a cure for neuroblastoma, a cancer of the nervous system that accounts for nearly 10 per cent of all childhood cancers and is the most common tumour in babies under one year of age.

“James has effectively left his tiny footprint in the vast world of research in this country, and that is an immensely powerful legacy to leave,” said Dr. David Kaplan, Senior Scientist, The Hospital for Sick Children, and one of the James Birrell funded professors whose cancer research lab will be receiving the new name. Others include Drs. Sylvain Baruchel, Paul Thorner, Maria Zielenska, Herman Yeger, and Meredith Irwin.

“It’s about making a difference,” said Syd Birrell, father of James and founder of The James Fund. “The research is making the difference. Now there’s a place with James’ name on it where research will be at the forefront.”

The Birrells, recognizing that research works best when groups from around the world communicate, interact and work together, are funding neuroblastoma research projects between SickKids and the National Institutes of Health in the US, the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, and Chiba University in Japan. Because of The James Fund, a neuroblastoma workshop was organized in Boston to facilitate collaborations between the Toronto and Harvard neuroblastoma research groups.

The James Fund also funds a Canadian scientist to work in New York City on a joint project between SickKids and Cornell University Medical College labs, the first example of a joint scientist working between the US and Canada in the children’s cancer field.

The James Fund recently committed to raising an additional \$10 million over 10 years to ensure the longevity of *The James Birrell Laboratories* as a global leader in neuroblastoma research.

“I cannot think of a more effective agency, foundation, or charity than The James Fund in the children’s cancer field, world-wide,” added Dr. Kaplan. “The Birrells, a family from Peterborough, Ontario, have single-handedly catalyzed neuroblastoma research in Canada and allowed us to take risks with our research that otherwise wouldn’t be funded.”

Because of funding from The James Fund, SickKids researchers have been able to leverage small amounts of valuable donor dollars to create large research projects. Scientific theories and out-of-the-box thinking not funded by traditional agencies have been tested and tested quickly.

James Fund scientists have made some significant inroads including the discovery of the rare cell in neuroblastoma that may be responsible for why this tumour keeps reoccurring after chemotherapy, one of the reasons why neuroblastoma cells metastasize to other organs, a way in which neuroblastoma becomes resistant to chemotherapy and the new drug treatments for patients. Without The James Fund these discoveries would not have occurred.

James Fund scientists have used the initial findings from seed grants from donors to obtain a further \$2.6 million in funding from federal and international grant funding agencies and the Canadian Cancer Society.

Because of the tireless effort of the Birrells to find a cure for neuroblastoma, their son James will live on through medical research through *The James Birrell Laboratories*.

About SickKids Foundation

SickKids Foundation was established in 1972 and is celebrating its 35-year anniversary. Its mission is to inspire its communities to invest in health and scientific advances to improve the lives of children and their families in Canada and around the world. Its vision is “Healthier children. A better world.”

In addition to its support of The Hospital for Sick Children, the Foundation has a mandate to support children’s health on a national basis. Through its National Grants Program, SickKids Foundation invests \$4 million annually across Canada in paediatric research, focusing on issues important to children’s health which have not been addressed elsewhere.

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