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The Hamner Institutes: Where great minds and medicines meet

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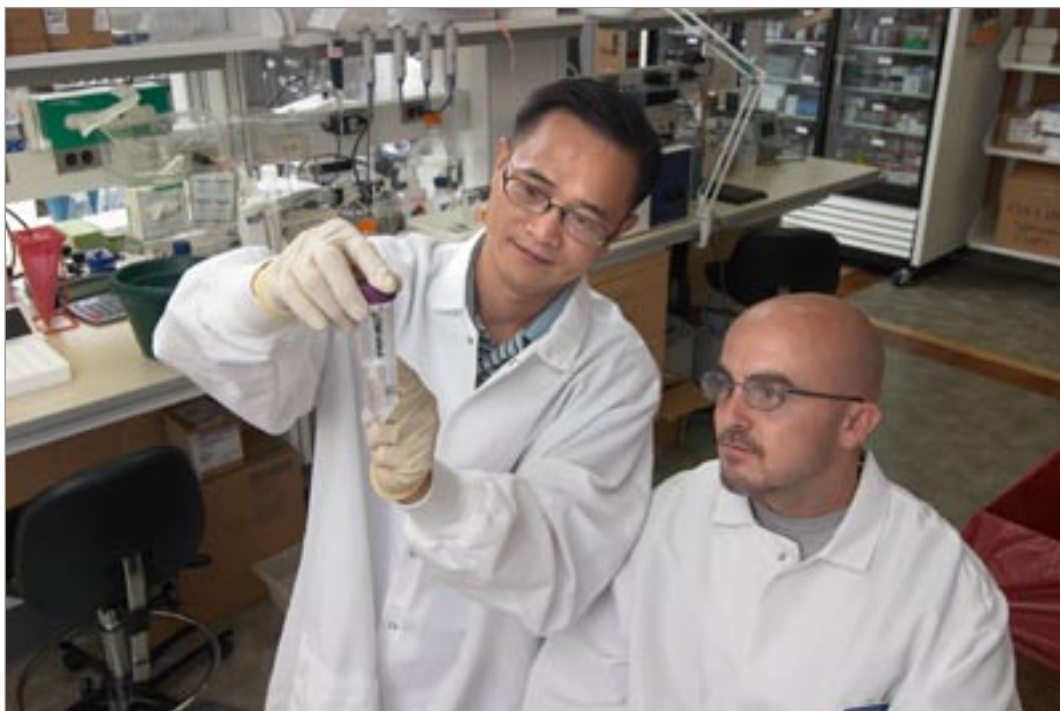
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Dr. Charles E. Hamner and
Dr. William Greenlee,
The Hamner Institutes

The Hamner Institutes for Health Sciences: Where great minds and medicines meet

By Ashley Arnold Photography by Robert A. Flynn



Dr. Wenhong Cao and research assistant Jerry Lupo of The Hamner Institutes research the mechanism of diabetes. On the opposite page, scientists work in various roles at Hamner's Research Triangle Park facility.

On June 7, the CIIT Centers for Health Research officially became The Hamner Institutes for Health Sciences, a nonprofit organization designed to bring an open, collaborative approach to the biomedical sciences research industry.

"I'm tremendously excited about the opportunity to have an impact on the development of new and safer medicines, while maintaining our highly regarded presence in the public health area," says Dr. William Greenlee, president and CEO.

"It's not just about the name change."

Over the past 30 years, CIIT has become a world-class institute in the area of toxicology and studying the effects of chemical, biological, and physical agents on humans. But several years ago, Greenlee realized that there was an opportunity to build and address the critical drug safety issues facing the pharmaceutical industry and, more importantly, the general public.

While CIIT will remain the toxicology and risk assessment center under the umbrella of The Hamner Institutes, the name

change brings growth to the organization, both physically and scientifically.

For decades, its mission has been to better understand the potential impact of chemical, biological and physical agents on humans. The independent organization also works with government officials in crafting public policy through its research endeavors.

But while CIIT focuses on chemical reactions, The Hamner Institutes will add drug safety and genomics as it relates to the effects drugs have on humans as research endeavors. As one of its expansion efforts, a new center for molecular safety sciences will be built.

"Drug safety will be strongly integrated into our research, education and business development initiatives," Greenlee explains.

Greenlee realized a need for further study of molecular biology in relation to medication throughout his years in the toxicology field, including time at Harvard University. Taking the idea of a person's individual genetic footprint further, The Hamner will investigate how certain proteins in individuals will alter the effectiveness of any given drug.



This understanding that different individuals — even those with the same symptoms — require different medications has the potential to revolutionize the pharmaceutical market, allowing for more successful drugs to be released to the marketplace with higher levels of success.

“This research will integrate safety and efficacy studies in the pre-clinical development timeframe rather than the clinical, as it is now,” says Dr. Charles Hamner, chairman.

Before he retired in 2002, Hamner led the North Carolina Biotechnology Center for 14 years. Prior to that, he led the University of Virginia Medical Center and has been an integral part of morphing RTP into the technology center it is today.

“I joined Greenlee’s vision to having a new approach to discovery and development because it was the right idea at the right time,” Hamner says. “This is a huge honor.”

Keeping it in the Park

In 1974, 11 senior executives of the chemical industry set out with a vision to create an independent facility to investigate the impact of environmental exposure of chemicals to humans; thus, the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology (CIIT) was founded. In 1976, CIIT moved from Delaware to Research Triangle Park, where it flourished.

“RTP’s vision was to capture the pioneering spirit and research in the universities, and help translate that into action,” Greenlee says. “We want to continue to represent and champion that connective vision, to be a gathering place.”

As evidence, the organization is in the midst of developing a 56-acre campus. Plans include a 500-seat auditorium with various types of meeting rooms, as well as a fitness center, cafeteria, library, business development and academic centers, and new

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

Name: The Hamner Institutes

Location: Research Triangle Park

Leadership: Dr. Bill Greenlee, president and CEO; Dr. Charles Hamner, chairman

Phone: (919) 558-1200

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laboratories.

The goal of new development is larger than the vast amount of square feet. Greenlee and Hamner have realized the need for a meeting place and common ground in RTP’s research and technology community.

“We are creating a life-science research and business development park — a place that will serve as a high-density hub in RTP, uniting The Hamner, our universities and industrial neighbors,” Greenlee says.

“Our goal is not to compete; it is to synergize with our academic and industry partners.”

Leading research and involvement

Over the years, CIIT has published more than 3,000 articles and reports, has trained almost 400 post-doctorate fellows and more than 100 graduate students, and hosts between 10 and 20 undergraduate interns each year.

“We are using new techniques from genomics, molecular biology and high throughput technologies, collectively termed ‘omics,’ to identify the cellular and biochemical factors that influence drug reactions in humans,” Hamner explains.

The Hamner is a leading force in functional genomics, computational systems biology, toxicology and human-health risk assessment. It is recognized worldwide and has received numerous awards for its research publications from organizations

such as the Risk Assessment Specialty Section (RASS) of the Society of Toxicology (SOT).

Because it is independent, CIIT has the freedom to publish its findings, whatever the results. Through this and its extensive research, it has come to be recognized as one of the pre-eminent scientific establishments in the world.

The Hamner also is deeply committed to the community in which it works.

“We are very involved in community outreach, and we have built very strong academic ties,” Greenlee says.

Through Project Suc-SEED, The Hamner Institutes has partnered with North Carolina Central University and the North Carolina Section of the American Chemical Society to recruit, support, and encourage talented and underprivileged high-school students throughout the state by helping them reach their goals of graduate and professional school degrees in various science disciplines. Students accepted into the program are placed in academic, industry and government laboratories for between eight and 10 weeks during the summer, and are given the opportunity to conduct experiments under the guidance of accomplished scientists. The program is financed by a Burroughs Wellcome Fund grant.

Greenlee and Hamner understand the importance of investing in the area’s youth and preparing them to become the next generation’s leaders. Similarly, they see the importance of encouraging the current generation to continue learning and growing in today’s technological fields.

“We want The Hamner campus to include shared interactive facilities, fostering a convergence of groups to drive innovation and economic development,” Greenlee explains.

“We want to be the much-needed piece to the overall fabric of North Carolina’s scientific industry.”