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Penn To Be Part of New Regional Center of Excellence for Biodefense and Emerging Disease

(Philadelphia, PA) - **The University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine** has joined the Middle Atlantic Regional Center of Excellence (RCE) for Biodefense and Emerging Diseases, a research consortium unveiled today by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

A consortium of researchers from 16 biomedical research institutions will carry out the NIAID's strategic plan for biodefense research. Eight regional centers of excellence, or RCEs, will be established nationwide with grants totaling approximately \$350 million over five years, \$42 million of which will go to the Middle Atlantic RCE, to be led by the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Penn investigators will receive an anticipated \$6.1 million over the course of this five-year grant.

The Middle Atlantic RCE will pursue the development of vaccines against anthrax and smallpox, focus on emerging infectious diseases such as West Nile Virus, and study new approaches to fighting viruses that cause deadly hemorrhagic fever, including Ebola and Marburg. The consortium will also examine other potential bioterror agents and the means to combat them. In addition, members of the Middle Atlantic RCE will design tests for faster detection of hazardous agents and innovative techniques to ensure a rapid public health response to biological attacks and outbreaks.

"In 1999, it was West Nile virus. In 2003, it was SARS. In 2004, who knows? There are a multitude of potentially dangerous viruses, bacteria and parasites that infect animals and that could be transmitted to humans," said **Robert W. Doms**,

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MD, PhD, Professor and Chair of Penn's Department of Microbiology, and member of the five-person Executive Committee for the Middle Atlantic RCE. "Emerging infectious diseases are a real problem that we all need to be concerned about. Penn scientists are already leading research projects on West Nile virus, Ebola virus and smallpox, with the goal of developing vaccines and new therapeutics."

At the heart of the Middle Atlantic RCE are a number of research projects. Of the 18 approved for funding, five are underway at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to his leadership role for Penn, Doms is developing a vaccine for West Nile virus. **Stuart Isaacs, MD**, Assistant Professor from Penn's Division of Infectious Diseases, is developing neutralizing antibodies that will help stem the potential ill-effects of the vaccinia virus that is used to vaccinate against smallpox. **John Lambris, PhD**, Professor in Penn's Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine is currently identifying antigens targeted by antibodies in immunized humans in order to engineer improved neutralizing antibodies.

Graham Simmons, PhD, a Research Associate in Penn's Department of Microbiology is studying how the Ebola virus gains entry into cells and how to block it from doing so. **Gary Cohen, PhD**, of Penn's School of Dental Medicine and **Roselyn Eisenberg, PhD**, of Penn's School Veterinary Medicine are collaborating on a vaccine to counter the ill effects of vaccinia virus and confer additional protection against smallpox.

In addition to the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Maryland, the Middle Atlantic RCE includes researchers from the following institutions: Johns Hopkins University, the University of Virginia, the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Georgetown University, George Washington University, West Virginia University, Drexel University, the University of Vermont, the University of Missouri, Kansas City, the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute and Virginia Commonwealth University, the Virginia

Bioinformatics Institute, and the University of Pittsburgh.

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PENN Medicine is a \$2.2 billion enterprise dedicated to the related missions of medical education, biomedical research, and high-quality patient care. PENN Medicine consists of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine (founded in 1765 as the nation's first medical school) and the University of Pennsylvania Health System (created in 1993 as the nation's first integrated academic health system). Penn's School of Medicine is ranked #2 in the nation for receipt of NIH research funds; and ranked #4 in the nation in U.S. News & World Report's most recent ranking of top research-oriented medical schools. Supporting 1,400 fulltime faculty and 700 students, the School of Medicine is recognized worldwide for its superior education and training of the next generation of physician-scientists and leaders of academic medicine.

Penn Health System consists of four hospitals (including its flagship Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, consistently rated one of the nation's "Honor Roll" hospitals by U.S. News & World Report), a faculty practice plan, a primary-care provider network, three multispecialty satellite facilities, and home health care and hospice.

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