Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute and UTHealth Open First-of-its-Kind Headache Research Center

HOUSTON (February 18, 2016) – According to the Migraine Research Foundation, more than 12 percent of the population suffers from chronic headaches and migraines. That’s more than the number that suffers from diabetes and asthma combined. To help find a cure for these debilitating headaches, Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center (MNI) and McGovern Medical School at UTHealth have partnered with the Will Erwin Headache Research Foundation in Houston to open a new, first-of-its-kind national research center called the Will Erwin Headache Research Center (The Center). The Center officially opened its doors with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on February 16th.

The Center was created with a $20 million pledge over 10 years from the Will Erwin Headache Research Foundation. Pam and Jimmy Erwin know first-hand just how debilitating and life-changing cluster headaches and migraines can be. They started the foundation in memory of their son, Will, who suffered from cluster headaches and, with no cure in sight and no escape from the constant pain, took his own life in 2010 at the age of 24.

“We want to turn our tragedy into something that can help other patients and families who suffer from this terrible disease,” said Jimmy Erwin. “Our dream is to help the millions of people who deal with this pain every day of their lives, and the Center is just the beginning of seeing that dream come true.”

Mark Burish, M.D., Ph.D., will lead the Center with the goal of setting up national collaborations, creating a network that can fight together, and eventually finding a cure. He is uniquely qualified for this; Dr. Burish is a physician, scientist and a neurologist who is also fellowship trained in interventional pain management.

“These headaches are possibly the worst pain that human’s experience, and many describe their headaches as being more painful than childbirth,” said Dr. Burish. “This is a devastating disease that hinders your ability to function as you’d like to and disrupts your quality of life.”
Cluster headaches are known to occur in cyclical patterns or “clusters,” which gives the condition its name. Although believed to be rare, they are one of the most painful types of headache and, for that reason, are also sometimes referred to as “suicide headaches.” Groups of frequent attacks, known as cluster periods, may last anywhere from weeks to months. Treatment options for cluster headaches are extremely slim due to a lack of research and funding, and most patients suffer in extreme amounts of pain with very limited options.

Focused primarily on finding better treatments and potentially a cure for the disease, the Center will be staffed with a core group including a neurologist, nurse, biostatistician, data analyst and lab members. They will also work on developing several collaborations with scientists who can help study samples obtained in the lab.

“The Will Erwin Headache Research Center will focus on patients with intractable headaches and more rare conditions like cluster headaches. Research on such patients has lagged because no one has identified a large cohort of such patients,” said Dong Kim, M.D., Director of MNI and Professor and Chair at McGovern Medical School’s Vivian L. Smith Department of Neurosurgery. “By working collaboratively with other researchers across the country to identify and enroll such patients, we can focus on understanding why these headaches occur and design interventions to help. We hope to impact the lives of these patients by easing their pain once and for all.”

The staff at the Will Erwin Headache Research Center will focus on understanding how headaches work and then use that information to design clinical trials along the way. The Center represents UTH’s and MNI’s joint commitment of energy, talent and research dollars to help people with debilitating headaches recover and participate more fully in life.

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About Memorial Hermann
An integrated health system, Memorial Hermann is known for world-class clinical expertise, patient-centered care, leading edge technology, and innovation. The system, with its exceptional medical staff and more than 23,000 employees, serves to advance health in Southeast Texas and the Greater Houston community. Memorial Hermann’s 13 hospitals include four hospitals in the Texas Medical Center: an acute care hospital which houses the Texas Trauma Institute and a Level I trauma center of which Life Flight® air ambulance is a part, a hospital for children, a rehabilitation hospital and an orthopedic and spine hospital; eight suburban hospitals; and a second rehabilitation hospital in Katy. The system also operates three Heart & Vascular Institutes, the Mischer Neuroscience Institute, three IRONMAN Sports Medicine Institute locations, joint replacement centers, cancer centers, imaging and surgery centers, sports medicine and rehabilitation centers, outpatient laboratories, a chemical dependency treatment center, a home health agency, a retirement community and a nursing home. As an Accountable Care Organization, the system also offers employers health solutions and health benefit plans through its wholly owned Memorial Hermann Health Insurance Company.
About The Will Erwin Headache Research Foundation

The mission of The Will Erwin Headache Research Foundation is to bring relief to sufferers worldwide afflicted with debilitating headaches by funding research focused on finding a cure. The Foundation has teamed up with Memorial Hermann Health System and The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) Medical School to fund leading research dedicated to these neurological disorders, and more importantly, bringing an end to the pain they cause. To learn more, please visit www.cureheadaches.org.