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Harvard Med Gets Record Gift From Blavatnik to Speed Research

At a gala two years ago, George Daley, who'd recently been named dean of Harvard Medical School, sat next to Len Blavatnik.

Little did Blavatnik know how expensive the meal would become. On Thursday, he's pledging \$200 million, the largest gift ever for the medical school and for his Blavatnik Family Foundation. The money will enable research, investments in data science and creation of subsidized lab space for biotech startups.

"One of the core opportunities Len and I have discussed together is to shorten the period of time between our deep investments in fundamental research and our ability to translate that into new treatments," Daley said in a telephone interview. "Len enjoys talking about science, and at so many of the meetings we've had, he wants to hear about what we're doing."

Born in Ukraine and raised in Russia, Blavatnik emigrated to the U.S. in 1978 to study computer science at Columbia University. He's now a U.S. and U.K. citizen, currently ranked the world's 43rd-richest person by the [Bloomberg Billionaires Index](#) with a \$19.5 billion fortune. He liquidated a sizable chunk of his empire in 2013 when he sold a stake in Russian oil venture TNK-BP to Rosneft for \$7 billion. His other assets include Warner Music Group, a stake in plastics and chemicals manufacturer LyondellBasell Industries NV and an expansive art collection.

Cellular Research

"I've seen how well-thought-through partnerships and synergies can make business investments thrive," Blavatnik, 61, said in a statement. "Drawing on that experience, this gift is designed to encourage additional cross-disciplinary efforts throughout the Harvard life science community."

Scientists increasingly realize the power of new technologies that analyze healthy and diseased tissue at the most detailed levels. Some of Blavatnik's gift will be used for an imaging technique called Cryo-EM that visualizes proteins as they carry out cellular processes, Daley said.

Harvard scientists such as George Church are at the vanguard in identifying new techniques for studying and manipulating genes. One example is Crispr, the genetic editing technology that's given rise to several biotechnology companies.

Researchers including Allon Klein and Marc Kirschner are sequencing the genomes of single cells within tumors, leading to a better understanding of why some are killed by cancer treatment while others gain resistance.

Cancer Research

Isaac Kohane, chairman of Harvard's Department of Medical Informatics, is leading an inquiry into why some patients respond to certain cancer treatments, with remissions lasting years, while others fail to get any benefit. Data from detailed imaging, single cell-sequencing of patients'

tumors and an array of other clinical and social measures may help optimize therapies such as new immune-oncology drugs, Kohane said.

The work is an effort to “really learn from every patient,” he said. “Let’s really give you a treatment that’s not just based on your doctor’s memory of your precise previous history, but on the previous history of all the patients, not only in the clinic, but in the world.”

The donation will accelerate those efforts, he said.

Five years ago, Blavatnik gave \$50 million to establish the Blavatnik Biomedical Accelerator and the Blavatnik Fellowship in Life Science Entrepreneurship Program at Harvard Business School, where he’s an alumnus. He’s also made science-related pledges to Yale, Stanford, and Tel Aviv universities.

Young Scientists

Since 2007, he’s committed \$80 million to create the Blavatnik Awards for Young Scientists with the New York Academy of Sciences. It was at the annual awards gala in New York that Daley and Blavatnik dined together.

The gift surpasses the \$90 million the medical school received in 2014 from Ludwig Cancer Research. The Blavatnik Family Foundation’s previous record was about \$125 million to establish a school of government at the University of Oxford.

The new gift is separate from the \$789 million Harvard Medical School raised in its campaign completed June 30, where donors included Bill Ackman and Leon Black.

— With assistance by Devon Pendleton

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