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Professor Gives \$105-Million Thank-You

By Caroline Preston

A medical professor who defected from communist Czechoslovakia in the 1960s has pledged \$105-million to New York University School of Medicine, where he has worked for 40 years. The gift from Jan T. Vilcek will be paid with royalties from the sale of Remicade, a popular anti-inflammatory drug he helped to invent.

Dr. Vilcek, 72, says he is donating the gift in gratitude for the university's decades-long support of his research. "NYU took a risk when they offered me a faculty position in 1965," he says. "I was young and had no experience outside Czechoslovakia, and they took me in and gave me the opportunity to establish my research program and develop it."

The medical school will use the money to support education and research in the Department of Microbiology, where Dr. Vilcek is a professor, and the Department of Otolaryngology. In recognition of the gift, the school plans to name a professorship and laboratories after Dr. Vilcek and his wife, Marica.

Dr. Vilcek started making his fortune in 1998, when Remicade went on the market. Sales of the drug, which is used to fight rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, and other inflammatory diseases, were about \$2.1-billion in the United States over the 12-month period ending this June, according to IMS Health, a consulting firm that tracks pharmaceutical sales.

New York University will receive Dr. Vilcek's gift in three parts: an initial cash payment, a charitable remainder trust, and quarterly payments that will continue until 2018. Depending on the performance of Remicade, the total gift could amount to more or less than \$105-million.

New Foundation

The success of Remicade has also enabled Dr. Vilcek and his wife to start an operating foundation that supports their professional interests -- biomedical research and the arts and culture. Ms. Vilcek, an art historian, joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art shortly after her husband began work at NYU, retiring as associate curator of the acquisitions and catalog department.

Like NYU, the foundation receives a portion of the drug's royalties, helping its \$15-million endowment to grow at an annual rate of up to 40 percent, according to Rick Kinsel, the foundation's executive director. Ms. Vilcek says the growth allows the couple to shift from a "passive role" of supporting existing programs to creating their own projects.

The first of those projects will involve relocating the foundation's headquarters from the Vilcek's Manhattan apartment to a new site that will serve as both administrative offices and a cultural center. The building will include an exhibit space to showcase and promote the work of artists, filmmakers, and poets, many of them immigrants, who have not yet achieved critical or financial success, says Ms. Vilcek.

Beginning next spring, the Vilcek Foundation will also give out annual awards of \$50,000 each to two people who have realized significant achievements in the arts and biomedical research since immigrating to the United States. The Vilceks hope the awards will raise awareness about the contributions of immigrants to America and establish role models for young immigrants.

"When we came to this country, we were unknown. We started somewhere new, with no references or guarantees, and this country gave us an opportunity," says Ms. Vilcek. "Since now we have the chance to give opportunities to others, we want to give back as much as we can."