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Technology transfer tools drive discovery

BY TAMMIE SMITH

In the scientific realm, cutting-edge discoveries or breakthrough technologies receive all of the recognition. However, research materials, though often taken for granted, are equally important to the discovery process. Cell lines, monoclonal antibodies, reagents, animal models, combinatorial chemistry libraries, clones and cloning tools, databases and computer software all are essential to help scientists advance their experiments.

Material transfer agreements (MTAs) are the contracts used to create a mechanism for exchanging and sharing research materials. "The MTAs enable researchers to get the critical materials that they need to carry out their research," says Panya Taysavang of the [Office of Technology Transfer](#). "They [MTAs] reserve certain rights in the original material, but also give the receiver rights for new inventions."

The rights that MTAs reserve are particularly important to researchers like Allan Levey, professor of neurology and neurology department chair, and Kathy Griendling, professor of cardiology. "MTAs are important because they protect our intellectual property so that we don't lose out," Levey explains. "And we've had some major losses here before from not having that protection." Like Levey, Griendling says her willingness to comply with MTAs is due in part to the protection that they provide for her research materials.

Research materials are not typically protected by patents, which are impractical in these cases because they are time-consuming and expensive. Popular research tools can be licensed to commercial entities, however, through licensing agreements.

Monetary gains, which occur with commercialized research materials through licensing agreements, can be especially beneficial to the research tool creator, providing the researcher with discretionary funds that can be used to further research projects.

Despite their benefits, scientists can fail to appreciate the important function of MTAs due to the additional paperwork and the time it takes to process the agreement. "An effective MTA program strives to review the agreements in a timely fashion to minimize any potential delays in research involving the requested materials or information," says Shannon Walker from the OTT.

Marla Gearing, associate professor in neurology, uses MTAs mostly for brain tissue samples as well as some plasma, DNA samples and cell lines. "Things are going pretty smoothly now," Gearing explains. "It doesn't generally take too long to get the ball rolling. And as long as they [OTT] can continue to make it happen in a reasonable amount of time, I will comply."

Securing compliance with Emory's MTA policy among scientists like Gearing is an important yet challenging task for OTT. The public stands to benefit as much as the scientists from the exchange of materials, which helps promote cutting edge research.

"The mission of universities is the furthering of knowledge, and I think that there is a rich amount of knowledge that can be generated by using these materials," says Taysavang. "They should be shared, yet protected."

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