News

UCONN PHARMACY ALUMNA DONATES $250,000 TO ADVANCE ANIMAL-FREE DRUG TESTING

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A pharmaceutical entrepreneur and University of Connecticut alumna has made a $250,000 gift to UConn's School of Pharmacy for building out a program focused on non-animal methods of drug testing, including cutting-edge technology known as organ-on-a-chip.

The donation from alumna Jane Hirsh, announced by the UConn Foundation, establishes two distinct funds: the Jane Hirsh Fellowship in Non-Animal Testing Innovation, which will support pharmacy graduate students researching alternatives to animal testing, and the Hirsh Fund for Non-Animal Testing Innovation Programs, which will finance broader School of Pharmacy research into non-animal testing methods.

School of Pharmacy Dean Philip Hritcko called the investment transformative.

"This is very impactful for our school," Hritcko said. "It allows us to invest in research areas that we could not have pursued before without this technology. Being on the cutting edge of this type of research is really a game changer for us."

Organ-on-a-chip devices are small platforms lined with living human cells, which can stimulate how human organs respond to drugs and other substances, offering researchers a more human-relevant alternative to traditional animal models, according to the UConn Foundation.

As part of the initiative, UConn will integrate organ-on-a-chip technology developed by Javelin Biotech, a Massachusetts-based company, into its teaching and research programs. Javelin began working with Xiaobo Zhong and José Manautou, professors of pharmacy at UConn, in 2024, and the collaboration has already generated two major National Institutes of Health grant applications, according to the UConn Foundation.

"The key difference is that we're using human tissue," Manautou said. "That immediately increases the relevance of the data compared to animal models, which don't always translate to what we see in humans."

The shift comes amid growing momentum at the federal level. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) have signaled support for less reliance on animal testing, putting UConn at the forefront of ethical and effective drug development, according to the UConn Foundation.

"There's growing scientific recognition that animals are not always the best models for human disease," Hritcko said. "More than 90% of drugs that appear safe and effective in animals never receive FDA approval in humans, largely because of safety and efficacy issues. So, there is a real need to change the way we test new therapies."

Students participating in the fellowship, including Doctor of Pharmacy candidates, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, will receive specialized training and mentorship designed to prepare them for careers in academia, industry and regulatory science.

The gift comes shortly after the School of Pharmacy marked its centennial and received approval from UConn's Board of Trustees to change its name to the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, a move intended to emphasize the strength of its research enterprise.

"Coming off the heels of our centennial year, this is a moment of reflection. Looking at where we've been for the past 100 years and where we want to go for the future," Hritcko said. "This gift helps accelerate our leadership in ethical, cutting-edge research."

Hirsh, who graduated from UConn's School of Pharmacy in 1965 and began her career at Massachusetts General Hospital, went on to found Copley Pharmaceuticals and co-found Collegium Pharmaceuticals. Hirsh also founded Onset Pharmaceuticals and remains active on the boards of several biomedical technology firms.



Members of the UConn's School of Pharmacy standing in a gathering. The School of Pharmacy was recently gifted $250,000 by UConn alumna Jane Hirsh.

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