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Researcher Wilson to step down as IHGT head

The Institute for Human Gene Therapy came under fire after the death of an 18-year-old test participant.

By Emily Sanders April 23, 2002

Penn researcher James Wilson announced that he will step down as director of the Institute for Human Gene Therapy, effective at the beginning of July.

Wilson and the IHGT came under heavy criticism and scrutiny when a 1999 human genetic research trial resulted in the death of 18-year-old Jesse Gelsinger. Since that time, Wilson has continued in his position as director of the IHGT, despite procedures currently underway by the Food and Drug Administration that would bar him from ever conducting further research on humans. He did, however, resign his post as chief of medical genetics in the Department of Medicine in September of 2000.

According to Medical School Dean Arthur Rubenstein, Wilson's resignation from the helm of the gene therapy institute comes after a review of the IHGT's organization and focus by an eight-member committee that was organized in August of 2001.

The committee found that in order for the IHGT to be effective in developing new therapies and conducting research, the Institute needed to widen its mission to include cell-based therapies, stem cell biology and molecular virology.

Because the recommendations for a change of scope and direction of the IHGT would require more clinical research, Wilson decided to step down.

"The concept of expanding the scope of the institute into emerging new areas such as stem cells is truly exciting," Wilson said in an e-mail statement Friday. "I will do whatever I can to support these initiatives."

"The promise of gene therapy appears to be one of the many promising therapies these days," University President Judith Rodin said. "We want to broaden our approach and continue our translational research and have investigatory work across the field and learn from one another."

Wilson, who will continue on as the chairman and professor of the Molecular and Cellular Engineering Department, said in his statement that he plans to dedicate more time to teaching and to work on research for new and improved gene delivery devices for the treatment of a variety of genetic diseases.

"This has nothing to do with Wilson's faculty position and tenure," Rubenstein said of Wilson's resignation. "He will go on working on the basic science of gene therapy as an individual faculty member."

Rubenstein added that a replacement for Wilson has yet to be named.

And according to Rubenstein, Wilson's resignation had nothing to do with the Gelsinger case.

"That was resolved independently of this," he said.

However, for Paul Gelsinger, Jesse's father, the case is far from resolved.

"It all seems pretty political to me, and is two years past due," Gelsinger said of Wilson's decision to resign. "It was a move on Penn's part to get Wilson out of the forefront because he is not a good manager and his style has caused several employees to leave IHGT."

"Penn needs to publicly apologize," Gelsinger added. "Until that happens, the healing process for the Institute and for us can not be concluded."

The Gelsinger family's attorney, Alan Milstein, who represented the family in its now-settled lawsuit against Penn, Wilson and others, echoed his client's sentiments.

"This action rings fairly hollow with us," he said. "The Gelsinger family and I have been surprised and disappointed at the seeming lack of any consequence to Wilson for the misdeeds that led to the death of Jesse Gelsinger."

On May 3, NBC's Dateline will air a segment on the ongoing saga surrounding the Gelsinger case.

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