The mission to save minds

Mark Krembil, president of the Krembil Foundation, on why his family gives to brain research

Renee Sylvestre-Williams

You might be surprised to find the brain has traditionally taken a back seat to other research areas when it comes to funding. While the brain may be the organ that makes us tick, other important areas such as cancer and cardiac have received proportionally more funding over the years. In 2000, Mark Krembil noticed that our most important organ wasn't getting the attention it deserved and decided to make the brain a major focus at the Krembil Foundation. Since then, the Foundation has been a major brain research donor in Canada and, Mr. Krembil says, it will keep supporting brain research as long as there is need. We asked him why he is so interested in the brain, how technology is changing the way doctors work and what his peers can do to step up their own giving.

HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS, AND OTHER PEOPLE'S DONATIONS, HAVE HELPED?

I started looking at the brain in 2000, and since then our understanding has advanced dramatically. We understand much more about brain cellular chemistry and plasticity, how it changes and how sometimes it can even heal itself. Despite these advances we have only just scratched the surface. Before we can develop therapies for people suffering from these terrible conditions much more needs to be discovered.

FOR ALL THE SUCCESSES THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN A LOT OF FAILURES. WHAT CAN WE TAKE FROM THAT?

It is true – for example, a disease such as Alzheimer's has had many clinical trial failures – however, failure is part of learning and with each failure we learn a little bit more about what is happening in the brain. The Foundation focuses on basic research in hopes of discovering fundamental biological building blocks that can be used to develop therapies.

TECHNOLOGY AND MEDICINE ARE RAPIDLY CONVERGING. HOW WILL THAT IMPACT BRAIN RESEARCH?

The brain consists of trillions of connections, and while traditional scientific research has helped us start to understand the brain better, researchers need new tools and techniques to ensure their progress continues. This is where technology comes in. Informatics and artificial intelligence are exciting new technologies that are starting to help researchers interpret the brain and advance our understanding of how it works.

HOW HAS MEDICAL-RELATED PHILANTHROPY CHANGED?

Traditionally, philanthropy helped researchers by adding to the infrastructure that supported scientific projects and recruitment, such as institutional bricks and mortar gifts and scientific equipment. While this kind of support still plays an important role, what is lacking is increased funding for basic scientific inquiry at all levels, from the multi-million dollar team projects to the single researcher-driven basic projects.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO YOUR PEERS WHO MIGHT NOT BE GIVING BACK?

This is a difficult question, as I prefer to lead by example rather than tell others what to do. I believe in helping people and would encourage others to do the same. We have chosen to help others by partnering with researchers in their quest to understand the human brain with the goal and hope that this information will lead to new solutions and therapies for those suffering brain disease. When it comes to giving, I would encourage others to follow their passion.