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Study represents hope for mentally ill

By JANE STANCILL; STAFF WRITER

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CHAPEL HILL -- A \$42 million federal contract awarded to the UNC-CH School of Medicine should lead to better treatment and more insight into schizophrenia and Alzheimer's disease, researchers, patients and mental health advocates say.

The contract, the largest ever awarded by the National Institute of Mental Health, was announced Thursday at UNC Hospitals. During the next five years, researchers will study the effects of antipsychotic drugs on about 1,500 patients who suffer from schizophrenia and Alzheimer's.

"What this represents is hope," said Beth Melcher, executive director of the North Carolina chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. "I can't think of two more cruelly disabling diseases."

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill will lead the study, which will also involve researchers from Duke University, the University of Southern California, Rochester University and Yale University. Quintiles Transnational Corp., a Triangle-based pharmaceutical services company, will manage the 50 clinical sites across the United States.

The scientists will compare standard antipsychotic drugs, which were first discovered in the 1950s, to a new class of drugs called atypical antipsychotics, which hit the market in the 1990s. The newer drugs are generally considered more effective with fewer side effects. But they are 10 times as expensive, and often managed-care companies pay for them only when the standard drugs fail.

There has been short-term study of the new drugs, but no analysis of long-term outcomes. And studies to date have not compared the new drugs to one another or to the older medications. This study should accomplish these goals and take into account the issue of cost effectiveness, said Dr. **Jeffrey Lieberman**, professor of psychiatry, pharmacology and radiology at the UNC-CH School of Medicine.

"At the end of five years, you have a large, rich database that will be able to answer a whole slew of questions," **Lieberman** said. "We need to be sure the new medicines are better than the old medicines. Why do we need to be sure? For cost reasons, if nothing else."

Chris Yount, a 32-year-old outpatient of UNC Hospitals, was diagnosed ten years ago with schizoaffective disorder, a form of schizophrenia. Since then, he has been in and out of hospitals, treated with various anti-depressants and antipsychotic drugs. Now he takes a new drug that costs \$7,000 a year, but it works without serious side effects. And even though Yount still lives on government support, he is beginning to feel well enough to get a part-time job and pursue his dream of being a writer.

"Graduate school is a realistic option for me now, and I don't think I could've said that two years ago," said Yount, who was at the announcement Thursday.

UNC-CH and Duke will run the schizophrenia study, while USC and Rochester will oversee the Alzheimer's research. Yale will conduct the cost-effectiveness study.

Lieberman and Dr. C.E. Davis, professor and chairman of biostatistics at the UNC-CH School of Public Health, will lead the project. The contract includes the option of renewal in five years for \$52.5 million.

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Caption:
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Dr. **Jeffrey Lieberman**, right, describes the \$42 million contract at a news conference. UNC-CH and other universities will compare a new class of antipsychotic drugs with old ones.

Staff Photo by Harry Lynch

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