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# Minnesota Medical Foundation

## giving matters



### Solving the puzzle of autism

#### A \$1 MILLION CHALLENGE FUND WILL HELP THE UNIVERSITY CRACK THE GENETIC CODE OF A COMPLEX AND GROWING EPIDEMIC

At 18 months, Jimmy Reagan was a happy, healthy, affectionate toddler. Then something happened. By the time he turned 2, Jimmy was frail and strangely agitated. He quit speaking, and he cried all the time. His parents were frantic.

In 1996 Jimmy was diagnosed with autism, a disorder that involves impaired social interactions and language difficulties but also can include a range of other medical problems. In Jimmy's case, not only was his communication affected, he also had chronic ear infections, food allergies, gastrointestinal problems, and mouth pain.

Today, the number of children suffering from problems like Jimmy's is skyrocketing. And experts at the University of Minnesota—from pediatrics, developmental biology, genetics, neurobehavioral development, and clinical services—have come together to try to solve this medical puzzle.

Helping to advance this enormous undertaking is a \$1 million challenge fund established by Alfred and Ingrid Lenz Harrison to support the University's new Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Initiative.

This collaboration between clinical, research, and basic science programs at the University promises to conduct breakthrough research and establish a coordinated care model for children with autism.



Since her son Jimmy was diagnosed with autism 11 years ago, Peg Reagan has learned firsthand the importance of coordinated care for children with autism.



To encourage others to give, Alfred and Ingrid Lenz Harrison pledged to match up to \$1 million raised for the University's new Autism Spectrum Disorders Initiative.

#### A perplexing and multifaceted problem

The approach is necessary, University experts say, because autism is not a single disease. "With autism, we may be looking at a disorder as complex as cancer," says [Scott Selleck, M.D., Ph.D.](#), professor of pediatrics and director of the [Developmental Biology Center](#) at the University. "There are more than 100 susceptibility genes involved in cancer. Our goal is to identify all the different genetic sources of autism, whether there are 20 or 40 or 500," says Selleck, who holds the Martin Lenz Harrison Land-Grant Chair in Pediatrics, established by the Harrisons in memory of their son Martin.

Recognizing that the study of a disorder this complex will require significant financial resources, the Harrisons pledged to match up to \$1 million raised for the ASD Initiative by December 31, 2007, to help fund basic science research.

"Scott Selleck and his team are clearly tackling a problem that's unbelievably widespread," says Alfred Harrison. "So it was natural for us to support this, but my wife and I decided to do it in a way that would also encourage others to engage in this project."

Today, 1 in every 150 children—and 1 in every 94 boys—is diagnosed with autism. Approximately 1.5 million Americans have received that diagnosis, and the number could reach 4 million within 10 years. What's more, autism is a particularly difficult condition to treat.

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#### MAKE A GIFT

If you are interested in contributing to the Autism Spectrum Disorders Initiative, you can [give online](#) today.

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