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Thomas R. Cech to Step Down as HHMI President

Thomas R. Cech, President of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute since January 2000, today announced that he would step down as head of the Institute in spring 2009.

Leading HHMI is truly one of the great jobs in American science — if not the world — but I recently decided that the time had come to consider a transition for HHMI and myself, Cech said in a communication to HHMI staff. I'm ready to return to the adventure of my own research and my own teaching.

Hanna H. Gray, Chairman of the HHMI Trustees, praised Cech's contributions to the Institute.

Tom Cech has been a superb leader for the HHMI, and we have been greatly privileged to have worked with him as he has guided its ever expanding activities and opened up new initiatives of large significance in pursuit of the Institute's mission, said Gray, the President Emeritus and Harry Pratt Judson Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Chicago.

Tom's scientific accomplishment and judgment, his deep commitment to strengthening the reach of science education, and his concern for the welfare of the scientific enterprise at the highest level of quality have made a deep and enduring impact. We are enormously grateful for Tom's contribution and for the remarkable period of the Institute's history he has shaped to such effect, she concluded.

Cech's tenure as president of HHMI has been marked by innovation and significant programmatic expansion and he noted that the timing of the decision was also dictated by his belief that sustained leadership would be required of any new initiatives contemplated by HHMI. Under his leadership, the Institute opened its first freestanding campus - the Janelia Farm Research Campus in Ashburn, Va. - as a new model for conducting interdisciplinary research.

Continuity of leadership has been essential for Janelia Farm, said Cech. The 'next great thing' needs that same leadership commitment over an extended period of time.

Once a successor is in place, Cech said, he plans to resume his position as an HHMI investigator at the University of Colorado, where he has been a faculty member since 1978. Cech shared the 1989 Nobel Prize in Chemistry with Sidney Altman of Yale University for their independent discoveries that illuminated the catalytic properties of RNA.

Cech has overseen fundamental changes in HHMI's flagship investigator program. He introduced focused competitions to identify exceptional physician-scientists and broadened the Institute's definition of biomedicine to embrace interdisciplinary research that embraces chemists, physicists, engineers, and computer scientists. HHMI also changed the way it selects investigators to ensure that candidates are drawn from a broader and deeper pool of scientists who apply directly to the Institute instead of being nominated by their home institutions. And more recently, HHMI announced its first ever competition for early career scientists.

Known at the University of Colorado as a lively and engaging teacher, Cech has emphasized initiatives that bridge HHMI's science education and research activities. Through the HHMI professors program, the Institute supports accomplished research scientists who are also committed to transforming undergraduate science education. The EXROP program - short for exceptional research opportunities - provides research experiences for talented undergraduates and shows great promise for increasing diversity within academic science.

Cech, 60, is a graduate of Grinnell College in Iowa and obtained his Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of California, Berkeley. He joined the faculty at the University of Colorado after engaging in postdoctoral research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Cech was named an HHMI investigator in 1988.

In 1982, Cech and his research group announced that an RNA molecule from *Tetrahymena*, a single-celled pond organism, cut and rejoined chemical bonds in the complete absence of proteins. This discovery of self-splicing RNA provided the first exception to the long-held belief that biological reactions are always catalyzed by proteins.

Cech has maintained an active research program throughout his tenure as HHMI president. His laboratory now studies the activity and regulation of telomerase, a key enzyme for replicating the ends of chromosomes.

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute, a non-profit medical research organization that ranks as one of the nation's largest philanthropies, plays a powerful role in advancing biomedical research and science education in the United States. In the past two decades HHMI has made investments of more than \$8.3 billion for the support, training, and education of the nation's most creative and promising scientists.

HHMI's principal mission is conducting basic biomedical research, which it carries out in collaboration with more than 60 universities, medical centers and other research institutions throughout the United States. Approximately 300 HHMI investigators, along with a scientific staff of more than 2,000, work at these institutions in Hughes laboratories. In a complementary program at HHMI's Janelia Farm Research Campus in Loudoun County, Virginia, leading scientists are pursuing long-term, high-risk, high-reward research in a campus specially designed to bring together researchers from disparate disciplines. The Institute's biomedical research expenditures during fiscal year 2007 totaled \$599 million.

HHMI researchers are widely recognized for their creativity and productivity: 122 HHMI investigators are members of the National Academy of Sciences and there are currently 12 Nobel laureates within the investigator community.

The Institute also has a philanthropic grants program that emphasizes initiatives with the power to transform graduate and undergraduate education in the life sciences. Additionally, it supports the work of biomedical researchers in many countries around the globe. Through aggregate investments of more than \$1.2 billion, the Institute has sought to reinvigorate life science education at both research universities and liberal arts colleges and to engage the nation's leading scientists in teaching. HHMI grants totaled \$86 million in fiscal year 2007.

HHMI has an endowment of approximately \$18.7 billion. Its headquarters are located in Chevy Chase, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C.