Loyola University snags six medical researchers from U of I
By Anthe Mitrakos
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(Crain's) — At a time when research funding isn't growing, Loyola University Chicago's medical school has hired away six scientists who specialize in infectious diseases from the University of Illinois, including tuberculosis expert Dr. James Cook.

Dr. Cook, 65, has been named co-director of the Infectious Disease and Immunology Institute at Loyola's Maywood-based Stritch School of Medicine. A specialist in mycobacterial diseases, Dr. Cook had been head of infectious diseases at the U of I College of Medicine since 1999. He starts his new job on May 1.

"It's a great opportunity to integrate the clinical and research activities . . . working together to grow the science enterprise at Loyola," said Dr. Cook, who has also conducted funded research into non-TB infections, such as mycobacterium avium, a waterborne illness.

The hiring comes at time when infectious diseases are receiving renewed attention, in part because of increasing outbreaks of C. Difficile, or C-diff, a deadly intestinal bacteria that often is spread at hospitals. Other conditions such as measles also are on the rise, partly due to some parents who don't vaccinate their children and younger doctors who are not as familiar with the diseases.

With the new hires, Loyola is expanding its infectious diseases focus, filling four vacant positions at the institute and increasing the total number of doctors to 11, from nine.

The hiring also comes as both private and public funding for medical research is declining. Between 2003 and 2007, biomedical research funding increased by just 3.4 percent annually, when adjusted for inflation, compared with an annual rate of 7.8 percent between 1994 and 2003, according to a 2010 study.

Since 2007, medical research funding has been “flat or declining,” said Dr. Ray Dorsey, an associate professor of neurology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the lead researcher for the study.

Loyola's Institute received more than $28 million in funding from the National Institutes of Health, the American Heart Association, the U.S. Defense Department and other organizations during the three-year period ended June 30, a Loyola spokeswoman said.

Dr. Cook brings with him a Defense Department grant of more than $1.1 million for a five-year study, in which he is a co-leader.

“Given the scarcity of research funds available, the demand for the highest talent increases,” Dr. Dorsey said. “The ability to bring in a large funded team increases (Loyola's) capacity to do research in a significant way.”

Before joining U of I, Dr. Cook was head of infectious diseases at National Jewish Hospital in Denver. He received his medical degree from Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.
“I’m very excited to have an accomplished clinician-scientist and leader in the infectious disease field join us,” said Dr. David Hecht, chairman of the Department of Medicine at Stritch, who co-founded the infectious disease institute in 2009.

Dr. Cook will be co-director of the institute with Dr. Katherine Knight. He has also become division director of infectious disease at the Edward J. Hines Jr. VA Hospital, near Loyola University Medical Center.

U of I is already looking to replace the physicians who have left, a spokesman said.

“In the past we have been able to recruit other people from top academic centers, as these physicians were recruited from us,” he said.

The other doctors jumping to Loyola from U of I, and their specialties, are:

• Dr. Maximo Brito, an associate professor who studies international HIV prevention.

• Dr. Nina Clark, an associate professor who will initiate and lead a new transplant infectious diseases program.

• Dr. Jennifer Layden, an assistant professor who will be a member of the transplant program.

• Dr. Susan Pacheco, an assistant professor who will co-lead a research program into C-diff, at Hines hospital, where she will also head infection control.

• Dr. Gail Reid, an assistant professor who also will be a member of the transplant program with primary research interest in viral infections in stem cell transplant patients.

Loyola University is affiliated with Loyola University Health System, which is owned by Novi, Mich.-based Trinity Health.