Dr. Anthony Torres, M.D., a senior research scientist at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, has been awarded a seed grant from the university’s Office of Research and Graduate Studies to catalyze development of research teams and projects that involve more than one department, research center, college or institution.

Torres said he has been working with scientists from the Genetic Disease Branch of the California Board of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health and Pittsburgh University on a project to determine if there are differences in immune function genes that associate with pre-eclampsia, a condition characterized by dangerously high blood pressure in pregnant women.

“We have DNA samples from newborn babies born preterm at 32 weeks or less and DNA samples from the mothers selected from 350,000 births in 50 hospitals in Southern California,” said Torres.

These samples are unique, Torres said, because the Board of Health in California has been saving newborn blood spots on all babies born since 1980, a total of about 14 million samples.

“If they want to research disease X, Y or Z from certain counties they can go to the medical records, then pick out the archived samples,” Torres said.

Torres said he and his collaborators are hoping to replicate the genetic results found in English subjects at Cambridge University with the California Hispanic preeclampsia population. Many genetic studies are different in different ethnic groups. The data collected during this study will be used to apply for outside grants.

Torres studies the relationship between immune function genes and autism in a similar manner.