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(Smart) Light Bulbs Go on in Heads of University Researchers

By John Fleck Journal Staff Writer

Imagine a light bulb smart enough to sense the light level in a room and adjust itself accordingly. Or headlights on your car that instantly notice a signal from the brake lights of the car in front of you and pass that message along via your own brake lights to the car behind.

Those are the sort of thing University of New Mexico researcher Steve Hersee envisions as he and a group of colleagues around the country launch a new research initiative into "smart lighting."

The National Science Foundation on Monday announced a grant that could be worth \$30 million over the next decade to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the University of New Mexico and Boston University. The work builds on next-generation light bulbs now under development that are both more efficient than traditional incandescent and fluorescent bulbs and also much easier to control. In addition to emitting light, the new bulbs can also detect incoming light, Hersee said in a recent interview, allowing them to become much "smarter."

"You can control them," Hersee explained.

That allows all sorts of new applications, Hersee said. Imagine being in a long line of cars going around a bend in the road. The first car slams on its brakes, and its brake lights immediately send a signal to detectors in the car behind. One by one, each car signals the impending danger to the car behind it, but it happens far more quickly than the reaction time of the cars' human drivers, Hersee said.

UNM researchers also hope to adapt the technology to a new type of microscope. The new light sources can be made extremely small, allowing new medical applications at lower cost than traditional microscopes, Hersee said.

UNM's part of the work will be run from the university's Center for High Technology Materials.

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