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PCMH breakfast encourages more problem-solving among staffers

By Brock Letchworth
The Daily Reflector

Steve Lawler strays from medical speak to use a sports analogy when describing the staff at Pitt County Memorial Hospital.

The organization functions as a team, Lawler says, and no team functions well without meetings to discuss strategy.

With that in mind, the PCMH president helped start a weekly breakfast which offers doctors, nurses and hospital administration a chance to solve problems in an informal atmosphere.

"There are venues in which we talk about issues, but having a more informal atmosphere like this breakfast where you can talk about whatever is on folks' minds really helps build the relationship between the physicians and the hospital, which is vitally important," Lawler said.

The breakfasts, held each Wednesday in the hospital's physician's lounge, began in January. Conversations range from kids and sports to the hospital's latest news, Lawler said, adding that the discussions sometimes are more valuable than those held in formal organizational meetings.

Dr. Walter Pofahl, former PCMH chief of staff, also played a part in getting the breakfasts started. He said officials looked at it as a good opportunity to solve problems in a comfortable atmosphere.

"We can discuss ways to do things better and help the hospital run better," Pofahl said. "All day long you're meeting with staff and people you work with, but this is an informal extension of that."

Lawler says he often leaves the breakfasts with "homework assignments."

"If someone says to me something is a problem or an issue, from an administrator's perspective it is a chance for me to improve something which will make our physicians' jobs easier," Lawler said. "That translates to better care and happier folks."

Dr. Charles Willson, director for health promotion and policy development at PCMH and clinical professor of pediatrics at the ECU Brody School of Medicine, said Lawler's willingness to participate in the breakfasts is admirable. Physicians and administrators must be working on the same page for the hospital to be effective, Willson said.

"He wanted the doctors to know if they have a concern they would like to talk to the president of the hospital about, they can just come down here on Wednesday mornings and talk to him," Willson said. "You can't find that everywhere."
Researchers isolate a culprit, are close to proving theories

By Ken Foskett
Cox News Service

New drug trials for Alzheimer's disease are enrolling patients in Atlanta and other cities amid increasing optimism that a cure for the fatal brain disorder is within reach.

Closely watched by researchers, the trials are the most significant involving Alzheimer's in at least six years. Several involve vaccines that target the suspected causes of Alzheimer's and potentially even reverse its destructive progression through the brain.

Even if the trials fail, they may at least validate — or disprove — theories about what causes Alzheimer's and how it induces brain cells to die.

"This is such an exciting time," said Dr. James Lah, an Alzheimer's researcher at Emory University, speaking to some Atlanta residents about the trials. "We are on the brink of making major breakthroughs."

More than 5 million Americans have Alzheimer's, with the numbers expected to rise sharply as Americans live longer. The disease, which is not limited to the elderly, is a progressive brain disorder characterized by short-term memory loss, muddled thinking and an inability to perform complex tasks.

Emory's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, one of 32 around the country, is enrolling patients in at least eight new trials this year.

A total of 146 trials are under way nationally, with more than half having accumulated enough data to begin evaluating how well the drugs work.

Findings may still be several years away and Food and Drug Administration approval even further. But research horizons are typically measured in decades, not years, so the presence of so many drugs at this stage of testing is significant, said Dr. Allan Levey, the Emory center's director.

"These are the first trials that are really capitalizing on what we know about the disease," Levey said.

While optimistic, Levey and others caution that the newest trials targeting the suspected causes of Alzheimer's may fail, and they warn that they all carry risk.

Researchers were excited about a vaccine that went into clinical trial in 2001 after showing extraordinary results in mice.

The trial was abruptly halted in 2002 after 18 patients, 6 percent of those enrolled, developed encephalitis, a potentially fatal inflammation of the brain.

Treatment symptoms

More than 100 years have passed since Dr. Alois Alzheimer, a German physician, first documented that a patient he'd diagnosed with worsening memory problems died with a brain profoundly altered by disease.

Yet the cause of the degeneration
eluded scientists for decades. In the 1970s, they learned that Alzheimer's patients had low levels of a chemical that helped brain cells communicate.

The first Alzheimer's drug, Cognex, wasn't out until 1993. It helped increase levels of the depleted chemical but had to be taken four times a day and had only modest effect.

"I used to joke that if you could remember to take it four times a day, you didn't need it," said Dr. Richard Stefanacci, director of the Health Policy Institute at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia.

Newer drugs, while better, still only treat symptoms, making the brain's healthy cells work better.

The latest experimental drugs are the first to attack the suspected causes.

Protein out of balance

The most widely held theory about Alzheimer's involves a protein called beta amyloid that gets out of balance inside the brain.

Alzheimer's patients accumulate too much, either because they produce too much or because their bodies fail to clear it out.

By itself, beta amyloid is harmless.

But over time, it sticks together, clumping in solid masses called plaques.

The plaques cause brain cells to withdraw, disrupting the links to stored memories and regions of the brain that direct executive function.

Over time, the amyloid sets off a toxic chain reaction that causes brain cells to die. At death, Alzheimer's patients have typically lost 30 percent of their brain cells.

Several gene sequences increase the risk of Alzheimer's, and risk escalates with age. Someone older than 85 has a nearly 1-in-2 chance of getting Alzheimer's.

Because Americans are living longer, the number of Americans with Alzheimer's could increase from 5.1 million today to 16 million by 2050, according to the Alzheimer's Association, increasing the urgency for an effective treatment.

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Avoiding side effects

Despite the aborted vaccine trial in 2002, drug companies continued to develop vaccines because they worked in mice. Researchers also reported improved memory function among the patients from the 2002 study who did not develop encephalitis.

Elan-Wyeth, a collaboration between Elan Corp. and Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, the developer of the vaccine that triggered encephalitis, has a new compound now entering a phase III trial with more than 2,000 patients. Phase III trials test the drug's effectiveness in larger numbers of patients and is the last before FDA approval.

Synthetically engineered from a mouse antibody, the Elan-Wyeth compound is designed to drag beta amyloid into the bloodstream, where it can be chewed up like any other foreign invader.

A passive vaccine, the drug provides the patient with the antibody, rather than stimulating the patient to produce his or her own.

Merck & Co., meanwhile, has launched a phase I safety trial of an active vaccine, similar to vaccines for chickenpox and the flu, that train the body to encode its own antibodies.

The goal of the Merck trial is to see whether the vaccine stimulates an immune response without triggering encephalitis or other side effects. The body's ability to generate immunity declines with age, so stimulating the response will be an important test of the vaccine.

Another strategy involves drugs that could disrupt the chemical reaction that makes
Davidson students score road trip

Tiny Davidson College, whose basketball team faces the massive University of Wisconsin in the NCAA Tournament, will foot the bill for its students to attend the game in Detroit.

In an e-mail message to students Wednesday, President Tom Ross said trustees offered to pay for tickets, travel and lodging for the Midwest Regional semifinal Friday night. The offer also includes tickets to Sunday's regional final — win or lose. The team may need the cheers.

Madison, home of the 42,000-student University of Wisconsin, is seven-hours from Detroit. Davidson, in Mecklenburg County, is a full 10 hours away and has only 1,700 students.

The schools represent opposite academic poles. Wisconsin, the state's flagship university, has a populist bent and a tradition of radical politics. Davidson, a private school, charges $41,000 a year, and employees do the students' laundry.

The road trip money will not come from Davidson's endowment, spokeswoman Stacey Schmeidel said. "At least one person on the board stepped up and said, 'I want to do this for the students.'" Schmeidel said.

By Wednesday night, hundreds of students signed up, so many that officials were scrambling for tickets and buses. They will leave Friday morning and return between 4 and 8 a.m. Monday — just in time for class.

"Students," Ross wrote, "please consider going to the game ONLY if this is, academically, the right decision for you."
The tuition game

By Laura Vanderkam

April may be the cruelest month, but for high school seniors across the USA, March is the most nerve-wracking. Will I be accepted to my top choice college? And — just as critically — can I afford to go?

Fortunately, getting in may not mean an empty wallet for those accepted to America's most elite universities this year. In December, Harvard announced that it was replacing all loans with grants. Families making $120,000 to $180,000 a year will pay only 10% of their income toward the $47,215 Harvard charges in tuition, room, board and fees. Parents making less than $60,000 will pay nothing at all. Over the past few weeks, Stanford, Yale, Brown and other institutions decided to make comparable commitments.

It's about time. For years, elite universities have sat on billion-dollar endowments as parents have practically hunted for change in the sofa cushions to pay their bills. Some families figured a prestigious degree was worth it. But "many parents won't even allow their sons and daughters to apply to private colleges," Harvard's dean of admissions, William R. Fitzsimmons, noted in the official Harvard announcement. President Drew Faust stated that Harvard wanted to make education "an engine of opportunity, rather than a source of financial stress."

Certainly, colleges should be commended for their generosity. But what's most fascinating is that as these universities have boosted aid, they've maintained the "self-help" component — asking applicants to work seven to 10 hours per week to earn their keep. While probably wise, and hardly burdensome, that decision raises important questions about social class and opportunity. If elite universities are truly interested in making middle-class kids feel welcome, they could shake things up a lot more.

Tuition arithmetic

For years, Americans have watched — aghast — as top college sticker prices have crossed the $20,000, $30,000 and $40,000 barriers. Lost in the shock, though, is the fact that the richest institutions don't need to charge tuition at all. Harvard's endowment of approximately $35 billion gained 23% in fiscal 2007, but the university tapped just $1.1 billion for its operating budget. That's just more than 3%. A 5% payout — the amount private foundations such as the Gates Foundation are required to spend — would have produced nearly $700 million more. That's about an extra $100,000 for each of Harvard's 6,700 undergraduates.

So it's interesting that these newly generous schools are still drumming students themselves for token contributions. Harvard's self-help requirement is $3,850, which it calculates as 10-12 hours of work per week. Stanford ($19 billion in the bank) asks for $4,500. Since a tiny percentage point increase in Harvard's endowment spending would obliterates the need for any undergraduate to contribute $3,850, requiring self-help is a philosophical choice.

"Getting an education is a shared responsibility," says Elizabeth Huddleston, Brown University's executive vice president for finance and administration. "The university tries to do everything it can to provide support, but also families and individuals contribute to the extent that they're capable." Sometimes students can substitute loans or outside scholarships for payments, but the guiding principle is that kids on aid will sting mashed potatoes in the cafeteria and man the phones at the campus center.

That's great; kids value an education more when they work for it. Indeed, working during college is hardly rare. Nationwide, 41% of full-time students, and 81% of part-time students, are in the labor force. But it raises the question: If elite colleges believe middle-class kids should work for their education, why don't they think all students — including wealthier ones — should work for theirs, too? A student of modest means who has gotten into Harvard already knows education is a privilege. It's not so clear the most fortunate students understand that, too. Some already benefit from fuzzy admissions criteria. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Daniel Golden's 2006 book, The Price of Admission, described (among other things) how one of Sen. Bill Frist's sons got into Princeton despite receiving the admission committee's lowest academic rating on a 1-5 scale.

Not only do some privileged students not take their education seriously, once enrolled at elite universities, privileged students and others "share one campus but move in separate worlds," Golden writes. Wealthy kids join different eating clubs, final clubs and secret societies. They definitely do not work at the jobs elite universities feel are appropriate for aid recipients.

Combining two worlds

That's a problem, because one of the biggest benefits of an elite education is not the education itself, but the connections you make after class. Universities can't do much about secret societies. But if they want to make middle- or lower-income kids feel welcome, they could mitigate this class divide on the employment front by requiring all students to spend at least 10 hours a week clearing dorms or refilling cereal canisters as a condition for graduation.

This idea of a universal work requirement isn't totally crazy. Kentucky's Berea College (which incidentally, charges no tuition, despite a smaller endowment than any Ivy's) asks all students to work 10 hours weekly. As a result, kids "feel a sense of ownership in the institution's future," says President Larry Simpson. Internal studies have found the work requirement actually boost academic engagement — reason enough, besides building community, that elite universities shouldn't let anyone buy their way out.

No doubt a cafeteria job might surprise some students receiving good news this month. But making education an engine of opportunity is about more than boosting aid. If elite colleges truly want to open their gates, it's worth a thought.

Laura Vanderkam, a writer based in New York City, is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.
Schweitzer's spirit lives on in N.C.

KAREN GARLOCH
Charlotteans Ashley Alexander and Ying Zhang, first-year medical students at East Carolina University, will spend next summer helping cancer patients in Greenville, N.C.

Amanda Hardy, a first-year UNC Charlotte psychology student from Cape Carteret, will teach dance to girls at Jackson Park Ministries in Charlotte.

They are among 24 graduate students in health-related fields selected as N.C. Albert Schweitzer Fellows for 2008-09.

The N.C. program is based on the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship, founded in 1940 to support the 20th-century humanitarian's medical work in Africa during World War II. Since the Nobel Prize winner died in 1965, the fellowships have supported the hospital he and his wife founded in Lambarene, Gabon.

In 1994, Dr. Trisha White of Davidson created the N.C. fellowship, using a $40,000 grant she received from a charitable foundation. As a Harvard medical student in 1984, White had spent three months as a Schweitzer fellow in Africa.

"I found that a life-changing experience, to work with underserved people," said White, a family physician who has worked in Cabarrus County, Lincoln County and now at Carolinas Medical Center. "I feel like all students should have the opportunity. This puts them back in touch with the reason they went to medical school in the first place: to help people."

To date, 255 fellows in the N.C. program, from the fields of medicine, dentistry, nursing and pharmacy, have completed some 200 projects. They range from offering health care and education for the homeless at the Salvation Army emergency shelter in Charlotte to educating farmers, fishermen and foresters in Eastern North Carolina about skin cancer to organizing a summer camp for at-risk middle-schoolers in Siler City.

Many of the programs continue even after the fellows have completed their work.

For example, both Alexander and Zhang have volunteered with an HIV outreach program in Greenville started by an ECU medical student who finished her Schweitzer year in 2006.

Alexander, 24, and Zhang, 22, met at Charlotte's Harding High School. Zhang graduated from Harding, but Alexander transferred to N.C. School of Science and Math in Durham.

They reconnected at ECU and proposed a joint Schweitzer project after Zhang volunteered at Hope Lodge, a residential center for cancer patients undergoing radiation and chemotherapy. While cooking meals for them, Zhang noticed they spent a lot of time resting, watching TV or reading in their rooms.

To "promote physical, nutritional and emotional wellness," Zhang and Alexander plan to offer activities, such as cooking classes and yoga. When their fellowships are over, they hope to recruit volunteers to keep the project going.

Hardy, 25, learned about the Schweitzer program from Annada Hypes and Kristin Daley, two other UNCC students and current fellows. They are providing after-school programs, called "Beautiful Girls," aimed at improving self-esteem in girls at Eastway, Martin Luther King and Albemarle Road middle schools.

"I heard about the life of Albert Schweitzer, and I really just connected with him and what he stood for," Hardy said.

Through Steele Creek Church of Charlotte, Hardy learned about Jackson Park Ministries, which provides low-cost housing for single mothers and their children. During her fellowship year, she will lead dance classes for girls ages 7 to 13 to improve physical health and self-esteem.

It's all in the spirit of Schweitzer, Hardy said.  

"He wanted to use his talents and give back to other people. I really hope this idea of sharing your personal gifts with other people will catch on."