February 26, 2013

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ECU Biology Professor Researching Risk Factors Associated with Fourth Leading Cause of Death in U.S.

GREENVILLE, N.C. (Feb. 26, 2013) — Every 40 seconds someone in the United States suffers a stroke, and nearly 40 percent of those survivors will suffer a recurrent stroke within five years. Stroke is now the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, and it is the number one cause of serious, long-term disability.

Funded by a $308,000 American Heart Association National Center NCRP Scientific Development grant, Dr. Keith Keene, a newly hired assistant professor in the Department of Biology and the Center for Health Disparities Research at East Carolina University, is evaluating the genetic factors that influence recurrent stroke risk.

A native North Carolinian born in Ahoskie and raised in Woodland, Keene’s research focuses primarily on the genetic risk factors within the African American population. Research indicates African Americans have nearly two times greater rate of first stroke, tend to suffer a stroke earlier in life than their Caucasian peers, have more severe and disabling strokes and are twice as likely to die from a stroke.

“Strikingly, African Americans are more impacted by stroke than any other racial group in the United States,” said Keene. “The southeastern United States is commonly referred to as the ‘Stroke Belt.’ Individuals in this region suffer strokes and subsequent hospitalization at a significantly higher rate than any other region of the country.”

Through Genomics research, Keene aims to identify heritable factors associated with stroke in the African American population. He says identifying risk factors can help minimize stroke severity, reduce death, decrease disability and save billions in healthcare costs, ultimately improving the quality of life for many individuals in eastern North Carolina and across the United States.

Increasing community involvement in research studies such as Keene’s is vital to helping find ways to reduce these health concerns.

“Human Genetics studies are often limited by the availability of individuals that are willing to participate in our research studies,” said Keene. “East Carolina University, and eastern North Carolina as a whole, possess the patient population and clinical/scientific expertise necessary to establish research programs targeted at the health disparities that impact our region. It is imperative that we increase community involvement through education, awareness, and participation in clinical trials and research studies to help facilitate our research initiatives as we work towards reducing health disparities in eastern North Carolina.”
Keene began working at ECU in August 2012, and will begin teaching Principles of Biology in fall 2013. Recently, Keene and co-principal investigator from the Brody School of Medicine Dr. Robert James, were one of three groups selected to receive full funding of a project, which is being provided through the 2012 ECU East-West Collaboration Program. Keene received his Ph.D. in molecular medicine from Wake Forest University in 2007 and his B.S. degree in biology from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University in 2003. He is the author, or co-author, of more than a dozen articles in his field. His other research interest includes the study of diabetes, a global epidemic that affects more than 25 million people in the United States alone.

For additional information, contact Keene in the Department of Biology at 252-328-1838, in the Center for Health Disparities Research at 252-744-5254, or via email at keenek@ecu.edu.

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