Support group formed for rare syndrome for females

Dori Pekmezci’s health problems as a young girl often baffled her parents. Pekmezci, Ph.D., now an assistant professor of Health Behavior, was a little short for her age at all of the benchmarks, and she also had some heart, ear and gastrointestinal anomalies and some difficulty with spatial skills. The family wondered if there was a connection between all of the odd, general problems, but the doctor was unable to put the pieces together to form a clearer picture.

Pekmezci’s mother insisted on genetic testing and discovered that her 10-year-old daughter had Turner’s syndrome (TS), a chromosomal condition attributed to females with common features that is caused by complete or partial absence of the second sex chromosome.

“Young girls are often baffled by their parents. Their health problems as a young girl were always a little short and had different conditions that seem to arise,” Pekmezci says. “But they don’t know there could be an underlying issue connecting them, in my case Turner’s syndrome; that’s why...”

Howard W. Houser started working at UAB so long ago, it wasn’t even UAB. Houser retired from full-time employment in December 2010 after more than 40 years of career full of personal and professional landmarks.

He was hired in 1965 as the assistant administrator and director of manpower development for the University of Alabama Hospital and Clinics. The university formally was founded in 1969. Houser, a former professor in the Department of Health Services Administration and associate dean in the School of Health Professions, is one of seven faculty and staff members celebrating 40 years of employment at UAB this year. The other 40-year honorees include Louis Dale, Ph.D., vice president for Equity and Diversity; Jimmy Harris, grounds; Jeanne S. Hutchison, Ph.D., mathematics; Shih-J. Oh, M.D., Neurology Chair Office, Ferdinand Urrthaler, M.D., cardiovascular disease; and Charles Watkins, Ph.D., chemistry.

A luncheon honoring more than 260 employees with 20 or more years of service will be held at noon Friday, Feb. 25 in The Doubledree Hotel as part of the annual Service Awards Program. All employees with five or more years of service are invited to a drop-in reception in their honor from 3 to 4:30 p.m. the same day.

“The week I started in February 1965 was coincidental with the federal order to desegregate the hospital,” says Houser of his early days. “I was the new guy, so the job of monitoring was assigned to me.”

Houser calls that an awesome experience.

A native of Syracuse, N.Y., Houser had been recruited to the hospital by then-Chief Administrator Matthew F. McNulty, Jr., whom he had met while serving in the Air Force in Montgomery. Even then, McNulty had the concept for what would become the School of Health Professions and wanted Houser to help him make it happen. They started planning for what would later be called the School of Community and Allied Health Resources.

After 18 months, Houser left the hospital to earn his doctorate in health administration at the University of Iowa, knowing he had a job in Birmingham when he finished. “We’d meet at professional...”

Howard Houser, hired in 1965, is one of seven to be honored for 40 years of service at the annual Service Awards Program.

Students challenge area teens in Science Olympiad

Science and Technology Honors Program Director Diane Tucker, Ph.D., says her students are not content to come to UAB and have a challenging major such as chemistry, neuroscience or engineering. “Sci Tech students want to go beyond that and work with faculty and make a contribution to research and development while they’re undergraduates,” Tucker says. “They signed up to work hard, make a difference and get the most out of their time at UAB.”

This year’s group of undergraduate honors students are no exception. Three students spent the past year organizing the regional arm of a national Science Olympiad in which more than 200 Alabama high-school students competed for top prizes on campus Feb. 19. The students took the project on as part of their three-semester leadership preparation sequence.

“This group realized that a number of students who apply to UAB and within our program have done Science Olympiad in high school, and it was a very stimulating experience for them,” Tucker says. “They thought the competition was a way they could get prospective students to come to the UAB campus, see what we have available here and let them know this program exists. If their interest in science grows, there is a place for them to study at UAB that hopefully will be a dream come true for them.”

The students worked with the Alabama coordinator for Science Olympiad and the UAB administration to make arrangements to host it and notified area schools. They started working on the program in spring 2010 and had a clear plan and a date in place by the end of that semester.

“Most likely are the first tournament ever to be...”

See TURNER’S SYNDROME p4

See SERVICE AWARDS p6

See SCIENCE OLYMPIAD p4

UAB Science and Technology Honors students Meredith Hubbard, left, Evan Colmenares and Charlotte Mae Kent organized and hosted on campus the regional arm of a national Science Olympiad in which more than 200 Alabama high-school students competed for top prizes on campus Feb. 19. The students took the project on as part of their three-semester leadership preparation sequence.
Faculty Convocation scheduled for Feb. 23

Eleven faculty members will be honored with the President’s Award for Excellence in Teaching during the annual Faculty Awards Convocation, Wednesday, Feb. 23, at 4 p.m. in the Alys Stephens Center Sirote Theatre. Also, the Odessa Woolfolk Community Service Award will be presented to Tamulane Blaudeau, Ph.D., research assistant professor in Human Studies.

Charles Watkins, Ph.D., professor of chemistry, will be recognized as the winner of the Ellen Gregg Ingalls/ UAB National Alumni Society Award for Lifetime Achievement in Teaching, and Andrew Keitt, Ph.D., associate professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences, will be honored as the 2010 Alabama Professor of the Year Award.

The 2010 honorees for the President’s Award for Excellence in Teaching represent each school, the College of Arts & Sciences and the Joint Health Sciences departments.

This year’s recipients of the Excellence in Teaching awards are Collin J. Davis, Ph.D., History; Lawrence DeLucas, O.D., Ph.D., Optometry; Steven J. Filler, D.D.S., Dentistry; Steve Grice, Ph.D., Business; Patricia Jennings, Dr. P.H., Health Professions; Nit Menachemi, Ph.D., Public Health; Mardi Rice, Ph.D., Nursing; Nathaniel Robin, M.D., Joint Health Sciences; Jane Roy, Ph.D., Education; Nancy Tofil, M.D., Medicine; Peter Walsh, Ph.D., Engineering. Each will be featured in the March 7 edition of The UAB Reporter.

Win free sandwiches for a year at Einstein Bros. Bagels grand opening Feb. 23

Enjoy free samples of menu items and coffee at the grand opening of the new Einstein Bros. Bagels at UAB from 2 to 4 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 23. The first 50 people to make a purchase in the store after the ribbon-cutting will receive a coupon booklet for a free breakfast sandwich each week for a year.

Nominations for the Ireland Prize now being accepted

Candidates must be a full-time, regular UAB faculty member who has notable achievements in their field of the arts and sciences, gained national and/or international recognition of peers and demonstrated talents that contribute to the elevation of the arts and sciences at UAB and in the Birmingham community.

The deadline for receipt of nominations is Tuesday, March 11. Direct questions or requests for additional information to Linda Piteo at 934-0513 or lapiteo@uab.edu.

UAB announces 2011 Football schedule

The UAB football team will play seven games this fall against bowl qualifiers from last season, including contests against Southeastern Conference foes Florida and Mississippi State, according to the 2011 schedule against bowl qualifiers from last season, including the 2011 schedule.

The Blazers will open their 2011 season in Gainesville against Florida Sept. 10.

Baseball, Softball tickets on sale

Enjoy all the action of UAB Baseball and UAB Softball for a great price. Individual season tickets for either sport can be purchased for $30, and family season tickets — good for up to four people — can be purchased for $75, with the ability to add more family members for $10 per person.

To purchase your ticket today or for information, contact the Athletic Ticket Office at 975-8221, e-mail tickets@uab.edu or visit uabsports.com/tickets.

Join in the Relay for Life April 1

Join UAB for the American Cancer Society Relay For Life from 6 p.m. Friday, April 1 until 6 a.m. Saturday, April 2 in the UAB Minipark.

The annual relay is a life-changing event that celebrates the lives of people who have battled cancer and remembers loved ones lost. Teams will camp out in the Minipark and take turns walking or running around a track or path. Each team is asked to have a representative on the track at all times during the event because cancer never sleeps. Learn more or sign up for a team at www.relayforlife.org/uab.

QEP newsletter now available online

The first 2011 issue of Degrees of Excellence, the quarterly QEP newsletter, now is available for download as a PDF. It provides current information on subjects relevant to the Quality Enhancement Program. Current and past newsletters are online at main.uab.edu/QEPP/.

Deadlines: News items must be submitted by noon on Monday the week prior to publication and are used at the discretion of the publication staff.

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Tammie Blaudeau, Ph.D., is a research assistant professor in Human Studies, but she has many other titles: mother, grandmother, scientist, teacher, dancer and an ambassador of wellness and the arts.

Despite her commitment to work and her family, Blaudeau finds the time to volunteer countless hours of service throughout the Birmingham community promoting wellness and the arts. Most recently, she has used her education and experience in her hobby, ballroom dance, to introduce the art as a unique, fun way to encourage healthy exercise for all ages.

For the past three years, Blaudeau has met weekly with seniors to promote health, wellness and the arts. She has volunteered weekly to instruct ballroom dance and educate seniors throughout the Birmingham community on issues of health, nutrition, and wellness.

A research professor, her interests at UAB lie in fitness and nutrition.

Three years ago she took up ballroom dancing for personal fitness. She loved it and decided to compete and extend her love of this form of art and fitness to others.

Blaudeau secured a grant from Coca-Cola and provided a summer program in ballroom dancing for inner-city children ages 11-18 at the A.G. Gaston Boys & Girls Club. She also taught classes in nutrition and wellness and coordinated the volunteer efforts of five professors from UAB who taught classes and supported the summer program.

Blaudeau also helped promote arts in the community by recruiting and judging auditions for “Chocolate Nutcracker,” an African-American version of the “Nutcracker” ballet.

And she worked numerous hours with the Cahaba Girl Scout troop to choreograph film and produce an aerobic dance video.

“Tami is tireless in the service of education, health-care delivery and the arts,” says David Allison, Ph.D., head of the section on statistical genetics and director of the Nutrition Obesity Research Center. “To put it in more human terms, she gives people of all ages who may feel unhappy about their bodies, their age or agility a way to exercise that is fun and strengthens their bodies and their self-esteem. Her enthusiasm and sincere support for their efforts is infectious, and she often receives a round of hugs before she leaves.”

In addition to her teaching assignments in exercise physiology, Blaudeau also volunteers as a guest lecturer every semester for two Introduction to Dance theatre classes and as an assistant in the PE 116 Ballroom Dance course.

And she loves to dance for others, both to teach and entertain. She and her dancing partner often perform at local senior citizen centers multiple nights per week.

“They’re so gracious and so interested,” Blaudeau says. “For some of them, where they may not remember their spouse’s name, they may remember steps to a dance or words to a song. It’s still a way to engage them and keep them active.

They want you to come, and they are so thrilled to see you. You just ask ‘how could I not want to do this?’ And the kids are the same way. They all really seem to enjoy it, and the metabolic benefits are well-documented.”

Blaudeau takes her fitness regimens seriously — she trained for the Olympics in judo many years ago — and her ballroom dancing is no exception. As proof, when she teaches youngsters and senior citizens, they are being instructed and entertained by the recent U.S. Rising Star Circuit Rhythm Dance Champion. She won that title this past fall.

All that will do is open more doors for her to teach others. She wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It’s a blessing and a gift to be healthy and to have talent in an area, and more than that, to have opportunities to share it with others,” she says. “There are exceptional people who came before you with those gifts, and they took time to share those things with you. It’s an obligation for you to do the same. As a mother you do that every day. When you become an educator or someone who’s in the public eye, it presents great opportunities.

“I’m really very excited to have the chance to do those things. I consider it a great privilege to receive recognition for doing something that I truly love to do, and I appreciate the support of my peers in selecting me for this award.”

Theatre UAB presents the world premiere of “We Three”

Theatre UAB will present the world premiere of Paul Shouiberg’s “We Three,” the 2009 winner of the UAB-sponsored Ruby Lloyd Apsley Play Search, March 2-12. Shouiberg, 34, a playwright from the Bronx, N.Y., will attend the Friday, March 4 performance and talk with the audience after the show, along with director Dennis McLernon.

Every two years, the UAB Department of Theatre seeks new and original plays confronting racial or ethnic issues, especially those calling for diverse casting. The Apsley Award is a $1,000 prize, plus a staged reading at UAB. The award exists thanks to the generosity of Ruby Lloyd Apsley, an early supporter of Theatre UAB and the creation of new plays.

“We Three” was chosen from more than 200 submissions.

“We Three” focuses on lifelong friends Jericho, Big Keith and Taz, who agree to perform holiday community service and participate in a mysterious university study to avoid prison. Tensions run high in this incisive comedy as the men are forced to confront issues within themselves and with each other. Set in New York City, the play explores and challenges society’s standard perceptions of morality, race, class and the meaning of Christmas.

The play will show at 7:30 p.m. March 2-5 and March 9-11, with 2 p.m. matinees Sunday, March 6 and Saturday, March 12 in UAB’s Alys Stephens Center Odess Theatre, 1200 10th Ave. South.

Tickets are $15, $7 for students and $12 for UAB employees and senior citizens. The play contains adult language and themes. Call 205-975-2787 for tickets. Visit the UAB Department of Theatre at theatre.uab.edu.
awareness is important. If your daughter is extremely short or has other Turner’s distinguishing characteristics, she can be screened, and you can get ahead of the curve on her treatment.”

Pekmezi recently discovered the first Turner’s syndrome support group, and she quickly befriended group founder Krista Jones. The duo is trying to raise awareness and promote an upcoming April meeting of the TS support group from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, April 16 in the Ryals Public Health Building.

Jones says this will be an opportunity for people to share their personal stories and learn how to connect with other TS women and families in their communities. Planned discussion topics include starting a podiatry TS clinic in Birmingham and preparations for the teen years and beyond.

Today Jones knows a TS diagnosis can shake a family, but she had never heard of TS until her daughter Vida was born in March 2010. She founded the support group this past year to connect with others and to learn more about its effect on children and women. She hopes the April meeting will empower others who feel lost or alone. “The first time I talked with someone who had TS I immediately felt better,” Jones says. “I was no longer isolated. I was no longer the only person who had heard of it among my family and circle of friends. Turner’s syndrome women tend to be so hopeful and positive. I’m not trying to make a generalization, but everybody I’ve talked to — despite what they’ve had to endure — has been upbeat and hopeful. I hope others can take away that feeling and gain some knowledge from the meeting.”

 Syndrome defined

Turner syndrome is named for Henry Turner, a physician who was among the first to describe its features in the 1930s. It occurs in approximately one in 2,000 female births and as many as 10 percent of all miscarriages.

Primary characteristics include short stature, premature ovarian failure and difficulty with spatial-temporal processing (imaging objects in relation to each other), nonverbal memory and attention. Some common physical features include a narrow, high-arched palate, a receding lower jaw, low-set ears, low hairline, slender, flat feet and edema (swelling of the hands and feet) especially at birth. Diagnosis is made through a karyotype test, which is usually performed on cells in the amniotic fluid before birth and on cells in the blood after birth. A trained specialist counts the chromosomes in the white blood cells and looks for abnormalities.

Edema was the first symptom that made Jones pursue further testing for Vida. Her feet were swollen at birth, and doctors wanted to watch the condition for a while to see what developed. Vida’s feet were still swollen two months later, which led to several tests, including the genetic test that showed it was TS. It was the first time Jones ever heard of the syndrome.

“Really, we feel blessed she was so young when we found out,” Jones says. “We can address her health concerns and be as proactive as possible.”

That’s the reason Jones formed a TS support group in Alabama with the help of the Turner’s Syndrome Society. “Vida is so young, and much can change during the next 10 to 20 years when she’s going to need all of these health services, so why not jump in and show our support and help raise awareness,” Jones says. “She can live a perfectly happy and normal life. But there are underlying issues that cannot be ignored.”

 High quality of life

Pekmezi is aware of those underlying conditions. She’s also keenly aware that when they are diagnosed early, the chance for a high quality of life increases dramatically.

For example, when she was diagnosed at 10, doctors started her on a growth hormone. “And now I’m 5-foot-3 — taller than my mom,” she says. Pekmezi and her husband are consulting with Wright Bates, M.D., in the UAB Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility and hope to start a family soon.

“There are so many amazing options available these days,” Pekmezi says. Pekmezi hopes the upcoming TS support group meeting will provide answers to questions and hope for those with TS.

“I love my life,” Pekmezi adds. “My quality of life is amazing. Sure, I still have some health complications, but I’m followed by amazing doctors and nurses. I have a wonderful opportunity to showcase the enormity of hosting the Olympiad, the team asked some fellow students to take the lead on parts of implementing the plan. Several other students wrote some of the tests for the competition and helped proctor during the event. “This group has been exemplary,” Tucker says. “They’re high-energy, organized, purposeful and have had an attitude that they would figure out how to make the Science Olympiad competition happen. The event is a tribute to their professionalism.”

SCIENCE OLYMPIAD

organized and implemented by students alone,” said Charlotte Mae Kent, UAB Science and Technology Honors student and one of the tournament directors. “When outsiders find out that we are undergraduates, they are shocked because it is hard to convince faculty to run an event like this.” Students Evan Colmenares and Meredith Hubbard joined Kent in facilitating this event.

Science Olympiad engages nearly 6,800 students across the country in rigorous, standards-based challenges. Alabama student teams from regional school systems in Birmingham, Dora, Alexander City and Montgomery competed in events that emphasize teamwork and group participation. They also conducted experiments, took written tests and competed head-to-head with their inventors.

“Science Olympiad is a great opportunity to learn more about science and engineering while having fun,” Kent said. “Hopefully, this opportunity enabled more students to fall in love with science and choose to make their career in a scientific field.”

The UAB Science and Technology Honors curriculum requires its students to lead a science project. This year one group chose to host the regional Olympiad as a service to area high schools.

“With the rising cost of gasoline and budget cuts within public school systems, we realized there was a need to have a centrally located tournament in Alabama,” Kent said. Past Olympiad competitions were held in Tuscaloosa, Huntsville and Mobile.

To raise operating funds, the students wrote grants applying for funding from the Alabama Power Foundation, Vulcan Materials and the Alabama Section of the American Chemical Society. They raised $1,000 to award a scholarship to underwrite the costs for a deserving team that lacked financial resources to attend.

“We want students participating in Science Olympiad to leave UAB with a better sense of the awesome science that occurs here,” Kent said. “Most high-school students do not get to go inside of a college chemistry lab, much less use one, before entering college. This is a wonderful opportunity to showcase the beautiful labs we have at UAB.”

Each of the students involved in the Science Olympiad also are involved in a research lab on campus and working to complete their undergraduate honors thesis.

Because of their schedules and the enormity of hosting the Olympiad, the team asked some fellow students to take the lead on parts of implementing the plan. Several other students wrote some of the tests for the competition and helped proctor during the event. “This group has been exemplary,” Tucker says. “They’re high-energy, organized, purposeful and have had an attitude that they would figure out how to make the Science Olympiad competition happen. The event is a tribute to their professionalism.”
Lievens provides personal touch to study-away students

A dvising for students in study-away programs is complex. It requires knowledge of academic credit articulation, program requirements, financial aid and scholarships plus the ability to locate programs that match the needs and interests of students who want to study away.

Christy Lievens has been essential to UAB’s Study Away office in these areas and others during her three years as a coordinator. As her knowledge of core information has increased, she has become more involved with faculty-led programs, policy development, advanced advising and pre-departure procedures, making the two-person Study Away office well rounded and efficient — all reasons Lievens is a worthy selection as February’s Employee of the Month.

“Ms Lievens is an extremely dedicated employee who goes above and beyond the standard job description,” says Josh Carter, director of the Office for Study Away. “She has created a very positive reputation for herself on campus, and the office runs efficiently due to her organization and attention to detail.

“Whether it is staying late to finish a project, helping a student identify an appropriate program, marketing Study Away to the UAB community or analyzing policies and procedures for efficient solutions and consistency, she is always a team player who looks out for the best of the department and the university,” Carter says.

Lievens is a former academic advisor who enjoys helping students get for the most of their college experience, she says. Many students who come to the Study Away office know they want to travel as part of the experience but not exactly where, when or if they have the means to do that.

“It’s a difficult process for some students. To see them progress — from being excited about the potential opportunity and overcoming obstacles to make it a reality — is rewarding to watch,” Lievens says. “When they get back, it’s amazing to see how much they’ve grown and how much it has become a student into who they are. When they share their stories and the pictures and tell you, ‘This is the best thing I’ve ever done. Thanks for pushing me to do it,’ is what validates that I am making a positive contribution.”

Lievens also assists faculty members who run study away programs, ensuring that every detail of their trip has been considered and mapped — whether it’s recruiting, planning or tracking student payments.

“Christy has been extremely helpful in all phases of our course planning,” says Ken Marion, Ph.D., professor of biology who runs a study-away course each May. “Planning details for our trips requires many hours talking to on-site travel agencies, tour coordinators, hotels, bus companies, airlines and others. This extremely time-consuming task frees faculty to be productive in other teaching and scholarly activities. I would be very reluctant to run certain trips without her help. Her logistical help and support has been immense.”

Lievens must assist a multitude of stakeholders to facilitate timely advising, registration and travel for students and faculty going abroad or choosing in-country experiences. Colleagues say she does this efficiently and effectively.

“Christy will go the extra mile to help the student with a problem or a question,” says Gaye Wilson, manager of Academic Systems and Operations. “What once was a very lengthy and frustrating process for the student and faculty has become a routine — a utility, if you will. When we push the button, we expect the electricity to do its job and the lights to come on. Only when it does not work do we notice it. Christy has worked very hard to make the product of her office a utility, and she has succeeded.”

Because of her efficiency, ability and desire to learn new skills quickly, Lievens has become consistently able to take on more complex tasks. In fact, she wears a variety of hats. At any given time she’s an office manager, accountant, personal assistant, student advisor, intern supervisor or parental liaison.

The cash-collection task is very complex, and Lievens’ ability to complete it accurately and efficiently enables the faculty-led programs to pay vendors on time and offer students a great study-away experience.

Lievens says her position is not without some stress. But she says faculty and staff throughout campus have the same goal in mind — helping the student. That, she says, makes her job worthwhile and fun, too.

“I actually enjoy coming to work every day,” Lievens says. “Not many people can say that.”

If you know someone that should be Employee of the Month, send letters of nomination to Kelly Mayer at kmayer@uab.edu.

All drugs for arthritis are not equal: some pose more risk

S ome biologic drugs may pose more risk than others, according to a new systematic review by a UAB researcher, who says study is needed to establish their comparative safety. Biologics are a broad class of drugs — based on biological molecules — used to reduce inflammation in diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and inflammatory bowel disease.

“Although effective, it is thought that some biologics may have rare but serious side-effects related to their immunosuppressing activities such as increased risk of infections and reactivation of tuberculosis,” said study author Jasvinder Singh, M.D., M.P.H., associate professor in the division of immunology and rheumatology.

The review, published in the Cochrane Library, is based on data from 30,000 patients in 163 studies focused on nine different biologics used to treat arthritis and other conditions. Adverse events were more likely to occur among those taking biologics than those in the control group.

When compared to each other, adalimumab and infliximab caused more adverse events, whereas abatacept and anakinra were associated with fewer serious adverse events. Taking certolizumab pegol was more likely to result in a serious infection than several other biologics.

Some adverse events, such as congestive heart failure and cancer, were so rare that it was difficult to establish any link to the drugs. “But there were few cases in total, so we can’t be very confident about these results,” said Singh.

“These results need to be taken cautiously,” said Singh. “The data provides some guidance for clinicians and patients regarding the safety of different biologic drugs, but these are not head-to-head trials. There is still an urgent need for more research into the safety of these drugs, and, in particular, their comparative safety.”
The school has enrolled 46 classes in health services administration since its inception. Other than the third and fourth years, all classes are available in Beijing. Houser has taught every class, a total of more than 1,200 students. Today those former students work at hospitals and medical facilities across the country and the world. Some of those former students went on to work at an endowed professorship in health services administration in his name.

And that, according to Howard W. Houser, is his greatest joy was being able to see UAB grow. The campus was in six blocks in 1965; it covers more than 80 acres. The School of Community and Allied Health Resources started with three faculty members in 1970; the School of Health Professions now has 98.

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Researchers from the School of Engineering have created a 3-D electrospun scaffold on the nanoscale that more effectively and efficiently facilitates cell and tissue growth in the laboratory.

Nanoscaffolds support the adhesion, growth and function of various cell types as they mature into specific tissues such as tendons, muscles and bones during tissue engineering. Yet, the traditional industry method for electrospinning creates densely packed sheet-like structures that prevent cells from penetrating the nanoscaffolds.

“Our three-dimensional electrospun nanoscaffolds better mimic nature and encourage cells to live longer and generate more viable or functional tissues,” says Bryan Adam Blakeney, a recent graduate of the UAB Department of Biomedical Engineering and a lead author on the study recently published online by the journal Biomaterials.

The discovery could lead to new applications for the regeneration of a damaged pancreas due to diabetes, among other tissues and body parts damaged by disease or other causes.

To achieve its three-dimensional scaffold, which it calls a FLUF — for focused, low-density, uncompressed nanofibrous mesh — the research team uses a spherical dish with a slight curvature similar to that of a home TV satellite during the electrospinning process.

“This allows the nanofibers that constitute the scaffold to intertwine and accumulate without becoming too tightly packed, which is the primary problem with flat, two-dimensional scaffolds,” says another lead author Ajay Tambralli, a student in the UAB School of Medicine.

Blakeney and Tambralli, who were both UAB biomedical engineering undergraduates when they conducted the research, and their faculty mentor Ho-Wook Jun, Ph.D., assistant professor of biomedical engineering, worked two years to refine the process.

The researchers say the FLUF’s more loosely packed nanofibers encourage cells to grow through the scaffold structure, creating the more stable formations that better mimic natural tissue.

“One thinks of a bowl of rocks: You pour a liquid into the bowl, and the liquid fills all the large gaps between the rocks,” Blakeney said. “But with our 3-D nanoscaffold, our rocks, or the fibers that constitute the scaffold, are the size of sand particles. We’ve separated the grains of sand to create gaps, and the cells fill and penetrate the gaps between the sand grains to form tissues.”

In addition to Blakeney, Tambralli and Jun, co-authors on the study include biomedical engineering graduate student trainees Joel Anderson and Adinarayana Andukuri; biomedical engineering graduate research assistant Dong-Jin Lim; and Derrick Dean, Ph.D., an associate professor in the UAB Department of Materials-Science and Engineering.

M any Americans have struggled with the thorny issue of taking the car keys from an aging parent or grandparent. But how do you know when to take away the checkbook?

Physicians need to help patients and families dealing with Alzheimer’s disease and its pre-cursor, mild cognitive impairment (MCI), recognize when an older patient is losing the ability to manage their own financial affairs, say researchers at UAB and the University of California at San Francisco in commentary published Feb. 16 in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

“Financial capacity is essential for an individual to function independently in our society,” says study co-author Daniel Marson, J.D., Ph.D., professor of neurology and director of the UAB Alzheimer’s Disease Center. “Diagnosis of cognitive impairment generally, and MCI and Alzheimer’s disease specifically, should signal likely financial impairment and prompt physicians to encourage patients and families to seek financial and legal advance planning.”

The commentary from Marson and colleagues is part of JAMA’s “Care of the Aging Patient: From Evidence to Action” series that provides evidence-based clinical guidance to physicians.

Patients with MCI typically still are functioning in the community with focal memory or other cognitive impairments but are beginning to show initial signs of functional decline. Since 2000, Marson and his group have published a number of empirical studies detailing impairments of financial skills in patients with Alzheimer’s disease.

In 2009, Marson and his group published a major paper on declining financial capacity in MCI and progression to Alzheimer’s, which involved a tool developed at UAB called the Financial Capacity Instrument. The FCI measures capacity across 20 tasks, including understanding a bank statement, balancing a checkbook, paying bills, preparing bills for mailing and counting coins and currency.

“Declining financial capacity is a good barometer for progression of both MCI and Alzheimer’s disease,” said Marson. “Our previous research has shown that a decline in checkbook-management skills can be a harbinger of a patient’s progression from MCI to early Alzheimer’s dementia. Emerging impairments in financial skills and judgment often are the first functional changes demonstrated by patients with incipient dementia.”

In the JAMA paper, the authors suggest that timely identification and informal assessment of financial impairment by clinicians often can lead to the establishment of effective financial protections for affected patients and limit the economic and legal hardships that often accompany financial incapacity.

They offer guidance on recognizing possible impaired financial capacity and signs of financial abuse.

Marson says it’s important for families, caregivers and health-care professionals to be vigilant about changes in an older patient’s financial abilities to avoid potential catastrophic financial losses due to poor decision-making, fraud and other forms of exploitation.

He and his co-authors suggest that caregivers oversee a patient’s checking transactions, contact the patient’s bank to detect irregularities such as bills being paid twice or become co-signers on a checking account so that joint signatures are required for checks above a certain amount. Online banking and bill-payment services are additional options for families.

Marson collaborated with lead author Eric Wilera, M.D., Veronika Steenpass, M.D., and Rebecca Sudore, M.D., from the division of geriatrics at the University of California at San Francisco, on the commentary.
So hot even Betty White is tweeting about us.

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