UA Receives $1 Million FEMA Funding

Grant to Study Firefighters’ Risk of Sudden Death from Cardiovascular Disease

The University of Arizona recently received a $1 million grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to study firefighters’ risk of sudden death from cardiovascular disease.

The grant is one of only five $1 million Fire Prevention and Safety (FP&S) Grants recently awarded by FEMA for fiscal year 2007. The FP&S grants are part of FEMA’s Assistance to Firefighters Grants, which help firefighters and other first responders obtain equipment, training and other resources needed to protect the public and emergency personnel from fire and related hazards.

Half of all firefighter deaths that occur in the line of duty are due to sudden, severe cardiovascular incidents such as heart attacks, despite the fact that firefighters tend to be a healthy group since strength and fitness are job requirements.

“For many firefighters we don’t have a really good way to determine who is at higher risk of sudden death due to undiagnosed cardiovascular disease,” said Jeffrey L. Burgess, MD, MS, MPH, principal investigator for the study. Dr. Burgess is associate professor at the UA Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health and director of the Community, Environment and Policy (CEP) Division, which is dedicated to teaching, service and research in public health policy and environmental and community health. He also is a member of the UA BIO5 Institute and the Arizona Cancer Center.

Standard risk factors – such as age, high blood pressure and family history – can help screen those more likely to die suddenly, but firefighters who don’t have symptoms of heart disease or these risk factors might still be in danger.

The two-year study will look at improved screening methods to find hidden cardiovascular disease in firefighters, identify risk factors for sudden death by heart attack while fighting fires and investigate ways to reduce a firefighter’s risk of heart attack through workplace modifications, such as the use of special cooling gloves after the fire. Researchers will compare markers in the blood of firefighters before and after fighting fires to determine which work factors have the greatest effect on heart attack risk.

“I’m very excited about this opportunity. It is an honor to work with firefighters to help create the safest possible workplace for an inherently dangerous profession,” said Dr. Burgess, who has worked on various projects with the Tucson, Phoenix and Seattle fire departments over the past 15 years.

For more information about this study, visit http://publichealth.arizona.edu/news/Research/NewGrantAidsFirefighters.aspx.
New Robotic System in Use at UMC
UMC recently acquired a robotic system that provides physicians with more control over catheter placement for minimally invasive catheter-based procedures in the heart. Recent advances in robotic technology have entered the realm of catheter treatment for cardiac arrhythmias. These technologies offer more precise catheter maneuverability, which is expected to translate into improved patient outcomes. This is especially true in the treatment of complex arrhythmias such as atrial fibrillation. In addition, these technologies use less radiation when performing these procedures, a big plus for patients and staff alike.

Tribal Librarians Gather at AHS L
Forty-eight librarians from Native American communities throughout Arizona gathered at the Arizona Health Sciences Library in September to discuss ways to meet the health-information needs of tribal members. Topics included HIV/AIDS, the HPV virus, diabetes and sex education. This was the sixth Tribal Librarians Gathering. Librarians at the AHS L work with groups and individuals around the state to share their expertise to improve access to trustworthy health information. “Three years ago, the libraries would offer only basic services,” said Ramona Tecumseh, co-chair of the Tribal Librarians Gathering. “We have evolved. We now meet all around Arizona to help out as many people as we can.”

Diamondbacks Pitcher Donates to Pediatric Playroom
Arizona Diamondbacks’ pitcher Brandon Webb visited UMC in November to donate a “Brandon’s Locker” to the pediatric playroom. The special locker is filled with new laptop computers, video games, arts and crafts activities and toys for children hospitalized at UMC.

Visitors Welcome to Historic Office on Phoenix Campus
Phoenix Union High School (PUHS) alumni and history buffs alike will enjoy a visit to the PUHS alumni office on the UA College of Medicine’s downtown campus. Memorabilia from PUHS’s long history are on display at the alumni office on the lower level of the Virginia G. Piper Auditorium, open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. Original buildings of PUHS, once one of the largest high schools west of the Mississippi, are home to the UA College of Medicine – Phoenix in partnership with ASU. For more information, call (602) 827-9010.

Submissions Accepted for Harmony
Harmony, the Program in Medical Humanities literary arts magazine, is accepting submissions for the 2009 issue. For submission information and guidelines for the Mathiasen Writing Contest or the Ryan Visual Arts Contest, please visit http://humanities.medicine.arizona.edu/.
Profiles in Philanthropy

Dr. Wendell Whitacre – Role Model and Supporter

When Wendell Whitacre, MD, came to Tucson in 1962, there was only one plastic surgeon in Arizona, and the state’s first and only MD degree-granting medical school was just being discussed. From the very beginning, Dr. Whitacre established an association with The University of Arizona Department of Surgery that has lasted his entire career.

“Every Saturday morning when Erle Peacock was department head, I would attend M&M and grand rounds. I got to know Peacock pretty well, and I learned a lot at the University, mostly from the volume of cases in the trauma center,” Dr. Whitacre said.

Dr. Whitacre, in return, contributed much to the Department of Surgery, including serving as acting chief of the Section of Plastic Surgery in 1989-90. He not only treated patients, but became a well-respected teacher and role model to many.

Although he retired last year at age 80, Dr. Whitacre continues to provide support to surgical education. He has created a generous estate gift that will establish an endowment in his name. Payout from the endowment will provide an annual award to the General Surgery Residency Program.

Dr. Whitacre was raised in a small town in eastern Ohio. His father started his career as a high school principal and then decided to go to medical school. “Dad opened a general practice with an office right next to the undertaker. My dad was pretty straightforward. I learned my straightforwardness from my dad.”

That direct approach to medicine is famous among residents and faculty alike. “Although not very delicate with his words, Dr. Whitacre had a fine touch when it came to the patient,” said UA vascular surgeon John Hughes, MD. “It doesn’t take very long to know where his heart is.”

Hugo Villar, MD, who has been a part of the department almost as long as Dr. Whitacre, said Dr. Whitacre was more than a good surgeon. “Residents knew that if there was no plastic coverage late at night, they could always call Wendell because he would come in to help, even if it was 2 in the morning.”

“You learn from books and lectures, but also by example,” explained Jayson Reynoso, MD, general surgery resident, at a grand rounds presentation held in Dr. Whitacre’s honor. “Dr. Whitacre would put his comfort aside and do what’s best for the patient. As a young intern, that really taught me a lot.”

Dr. Whitacre explained, “A scar could affect their life, and emergency docs can’t be experts in everything. You’ve got to take care of the people.”

Dr. Whitacre received his medical degree from Ohio State University and completed surgical residency training at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

“I chose to establish this endowment at the department because I’ve been associated with it for a long time, and I’ve learned a lot. It has been an enjoyable association. I also recognize that the department and its residency program are a valuable part of the future. Surgery needs to be supported.”

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Focus on faculty

Cheryl W. O’Malley, MD
Assistant Professor: Clinical Medicine
UA College of Medicine – Phoenix
in partnership with ASU

Hometown:
I was born in St. Louis, Mo., and moved to Phoenix when I was 3 years old.

Joined UA faculty:
I joined The University of Arizona faculty in 2003 as a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Medicine at Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center in Phoenix.

Professional Interests:
Among my professional interests are inpatient control of hyperglycemia, quality improvement, patient safety and faculty development.

Outside Interests:
I like to do home improvement projects and crafts. I have painted every room in our house! I put things together and fix things around the house. I mostly like the aesthetic part.

Advice to Students:
I would tell students to find the area and type of practice that they love. Being passionate about the work they do will drive them to work hard and spend the extra time that it takes to give the kind of care patients deserve and the practice of excellence medicine demands. Another piece of advice I would give the students is to continue to question things, to always wonder “Why?” rather than just doing things because they have been done that way in the past. If a student continues to ask questions, they will learn and do the right thing for his/her patients.

Learn more about Dr. O’Malley online at www.facultyaffairs.med.arizona.edu