UACC Updates

Supporting Smokers on their Journey to Quit

Whether obtaining a routine mammogram or receiving chemotherapy, smokers and other tobacco users seeking care at the University of Arizona Cancer Center soon will have access to a robust, comprehensive tobacco-cessation program.

First, Banner – University Medicine IT experts will standardize how patients' tobacco use is captured in electronic health records. U.S. comprehensive cancer centers report difficulties recording patients' tobacco status, which hinders the ability to consistently offer them support in quitting.

“It’s not that we’re not asking about tobacco usage, it’s that it’s not easy to find that information,” said the project’s lead
investigator, Tracy Crane, PhD, assistant professor at the UA College of Nursing. “It’s difficult to find tobacco use history, as it may be documented in different places in a patient’s record.”

“It’s shocking that something with such a clear evidence base is not integrated into care. If I asked the average person, ‘Do you think cancer centers provide patients who smoke support to quit?’ Most of us would say, ‘Absolutely! That’s a no-brainer!’” added Cynthia Thomson, PhD, RD, co-leader of the Cancer Prevention and Control Program. “We have commitment from both the UA as well as Banner to support this new programming and make sure we are in a very different place a year from now.”

When Melanoma Spreads to the Brain, Patients with BRAF or MEK Mutations Can Find Novel Treatment

Melanoma is the fifth-most common cancer in the United States. When it metastasizes, it becomes more difficult to treat. About 47,000 new cases of metastatic melanoma are diagnosed in the United States each year. About half of metastatic melanoma patients have mutations in the BRAF or MEK genes, and if the cancer reaches their brains they face a serious prognosis, with a median survival of less than 6 months.

“Most of the time, survival is short, and the cancer gets worse,” said Hani Babiker, MD, associate director of the Early Phase Clinical Trials Program at the University of Arizona Cancer Center. “Treatment options include BRAF and MEK inhibitors, immunotherapy, radiation and surgery, but a need exists for treatments that more effectively increase survival and decrease risk of recurrence.”

Therefore, in partnership with Spirita Oncology, LLC, Dr. Babiker and the Early Phase Clinical Trials Program have opened a clinical trial for patients with brain metastases from BRAF- or MEK-mutated melanoma. Participants will receive an investigational MEK inhibitor called E6201, a “targeted” drug with promising results from preclinical tests and an earlier Phase I trial.

UA Team Uncovers Promising Lead in Genetic Approach to Treating Glioblastoma
Glioblastoma, a deadly brain cancer that has grabbed headlines for claiming the lives of Sens. Edward Kennedy and John McCain, could be “tricked” into sparing more of its victims.

A team of UA Cancer Center researchers who looked for genetic differences between glioblastoma cells from long- and short-term survivors discovered that those who survived longer had a protein that might be targeted to increase survival in all glioblastoma patients. This work is in its early stages, and the researchers say they are many years and millions of dollars away from potential translation into treatments for patients.

“I think we have reached the apex of what the surgeon can do, and have achieved the most we can with radiation,” said Baldassarre “Dino” Stea, MD, PhD, head of the UA College of Medicine – Tucson Department of Radiation Oncology. “The cure will not come from more radiation or more surgery — glioblastoma is a genetic problem that we have to solve genetically.”

Other study investigators include Eric Weterings, PhD, assistant professor at the UA College of Medicine – Tucson Department of Radiation Oncology; Michael Hammer, PhD, co-director of the UA Cancer Center Genomics Shared Resource and research scientist with the UA BIO5 Institute; Christopher Morrison, MD, PhD, radiation oncology resident-physician, and Nicholas Gravbrot, medical student, UA College of Medicine – Tucson; and Daruka Mahadevan, MD, PhD, co-leader of the UA Cancer Center Therapeutic Development Program.

First-Ever Clinical Trial to Treat Liver Cancer Through Immunotherapy Is Accepting Patients
A novel approach to treat liver cancer using the body's own immune system is now in clinical trials at the University of Arizona Cancer Center at Dignity Health St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center. This will be the first time immunotherapy has been used as a primary treatment option for liver cancer.

In the United States, an estimated 33,000 people are diagnosed with liver cancer each year, and about 26,000 people die from the disease. According to the CDC, the percentage of Americans diagnosed with liver cancer has been rising steadily for several decades.

“Liver cancer is a major problem here in Arizona and the treatment options are very limited,” said William Cance, MD, deputy director of the UA Cancer Center at Dignity Health St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center. “It’s an aggressive disease with very few treatment options. Because of this, many Americans with liver cancer receive no treatment at all.”

With a Nurse in their Corner, ‘Navigating’ Care Is Getting Easier for Cancer Patients

A cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming, sending new patients' lives into a tailspin as they scramble to understand their disease, rearrange schedules and adjust future plans. During this difficult time, many patients could benefit from the guidance of an expert who knows every nook and cranny of the complicated cancer-care system.

In recent years, Banner Health nurse navigators at the University of Arizona Cancer Center have emerged to fill that role.

“The concept of nurse navigators is new to Tucson,” said Beth High, MSN, RN, a Banner Health clinical program manager for navigation with the UA Cancer Center. “Although awareness is low, the value of a nurse navigator is sky high.”
All patients with cancer are assigned nurse navigators, who educate and advocate for them throughout their cancer journey. By connecting patients to support services to equip them to overcome barriers to care, such as transportation issues or financial difficulties, a navigator helps lighten the burden of “navigating” the system.

UA Hockey Team to Host Fifth Annual ‘Pink the Rink’ Jan. 19

The University of Arizona hockey team will host its annual “Pink the Rink” cancer-awareness game Saturday, Jan. 19, at 7:30 p.m., when the Wildcats will sport pink jerseys honoring individuals who have suffered from cancer, during their game against the University of Central Oklahoma. The game will take place at the Tucson Arena, 260 S. Church Ave.

Community members are invited to participate in this event by purchasing a special jersey featuring the name of a loved one to be worn by an Arizona player during the game. During a post-game ceremony, players will present their game-worn jerseys to the purchasers. Honorees may include cancer victims, cancer survivors or individuals battling the disease. They also may choose to honor those who care for patients in the home, volunteer through community work or have dedicated their careers to battling cancer.

Jerseys are $250 and all proceeds go directly to the UA Cancer Center. All proceeds from ticket sales also will benefit the UA Cancer Center. Tickets range from $10-14.

For more information or to purchase a jersey or tickets: http://www.arizonawildcathockey.org/pink

Clara Curiel, MD, Honored as Academic Champion
Clara Curiel, MD, leader of the Cutaneous Oncology Program, was honored as an Academic Champion. She joined UA President Robert. C. Robbins and Dave Heeke, vice president and director of athletics, at the Colorado vs. UA football game, on Nov. 2, 2018, during the first timeout of the first quarter.

Congratulations to Dr. Curiel for this honor!

Tracy Crane, PhD, and David O. Garcia, PhD, Honored Among Tucson’s ‘40 Under 40’

The UA Cancer Center's very own David O. Garcia, PhD, and Tracy Crane, PhD, were selected as two of Tucson's “40 Under 40.” The 2018 honorees were recognized in an awards breakfast on Dec. 4 at the Pima Air & Space Museum. The 14th annual 40 Under 40 program is sponsored by the Tucson Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Arizona Daily Star.

Dr. Garcia is an assistant professor at the Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health. He has extensive experience in the areas of physical activity, diet and weight management. He has dedicated the early part of his career to enhance efforts to provide service to the Mexican-American community in Tucson.

Dr. Crane is an assistant professor at the UA College of Nursing. Over the past 15 years she has worked with more than 3,500 cancer survivors and is passionate about changing the cancer trajectory through lifestyle interventions that integrate mobile technology to reach more cancer survivors and their caregivers.
Three UA Researchers Receive American Cancer Society Institutional Research Grants

Three UA Cancer Center members received Institutional Cancer Research Grants from the American Cancer Society.

**David O. Garcia, PhD**, assistant professor of public health, is spearheading a project titled "Developing a culturally sensitive nutrigenetic intervention to reduce liver cancer risk in Mexican-origin adults." He is looking into the prevalence of nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) in Tucson with a focus on genetic risk factors and dietary behaviors among adults of Mexican origin. NAFLD, which is a risk factor for liver cancer, disproportionately affects individuals of Mexican origin. The data will form the basis for future research into tailoring a dietary approach to reduce risk for this type of liver disease.

**Megha Padi, PhD**, assistant professor of molecular and cellular biology and director of the Bioinformatics Shared Resource, is at the helm of a project titled...
“Detecting functional modules that drive cellular transformation.” To deepen our understanding of the connection between cancer pathways and drug response, Dr. Padi is developing a network analysis tool to analyze how Merkel cell polyomavirus shapes the first few steps of cancer formation. The ultimate goal is to identify new therapeutic targets in Merkel cell carcinoma.

Justin Wilson, PhD, assistant professor of immunobiology, is heading a project titled “Regulation of Head and Neck Squamous Cell Carcinoma by AIM2.” He will test the hypothesis that AIM2, an innate immune sensor, regulates head-and-neck squamous cell carcinomas (HNSCC) by promoting the inflammatory cytokine IL1-beta or suppressing the activation of PI3K/Akt signaling. Dr. Wilson hopes the results will help identify novel biomarkers for HNSCC, which would enable both earlier detection of the disease and the development of targeted therapeutics.

**Scenes from the 2018 Melanoma Walk**

On Saturday, Nov. 3, the Skin Cancer Institute held its ninth annual Melanoma Walk. We welcomed 265 registered walkers, who came together to walk three laps around the UA Mall.
The first lap was walked to honor those lost to melanoma, the second lap was to celebrate those living with melanoma, and the third lap represented hope for the future.

We screened 32 people for skin cancer, and raised more than $54,000 to continue our mission to prevent and cure skin cancer. Thanks to our participants, volunteers, staff and sponsors!

UACC on the Air and on the Web

On Dec. 3, Arizona Public Media aired a radio interview with Baldassarre Stea, MD,
In December, Baldassarre “Dino” Stea, MD, talked to KGUN channel 9 about the future of glioblastoma prognosis and treatment. Watch Video.

PhD, head of the UA College of Medicine – Tucson Department of Radiation Oncology, who was part of a UA team that uncovered new clues about the potential for extending survival for glioblastoma patients. Listen.

Do You Want to Help Educate the Community About Cancer?

The communications unit is compiling a list of experts willing to speak to reporters and the community. This spreadsheet allows us to respond quickly to requests from media and community members, many of whom might be working under tight deadlines.

So far, we only have three experts in Phoenix, and would love to expand our pool of experts there.

We are also short on experts in the following subject areas:

- leukemia
- myeloma
- testicular cancer
- thoracic cancer
- bone marrow transplantation
- supplementation
- environmental exposures
- bioinformatics
- proteomics

Please fill out the following survey if you are interested in helping to educate the wider community about issues in cancer care, prevention and research.

Take Survey

A hearty thanks to the 37 UACC folks who have already filled out the survey!
National Conversation

- **Why Are So Many People Suddenly Allergic to Meat? (Slate):** Adverse reactions to cetuximab during clinical trials helped explain mysterious meat allergies.
- **Do Cruciferous Vegetables Really Fight Cancer? (New York Times):** What does the latest science have to say about the possible cancer-fighting properties of broccoli?
- **Cancer Care: The Deceptive Marketing of Hope (Truth in Advertising):** Of the 50 cancer centers that spent the most on advertising, 90 percent deceptively promote atypical patient experiences through the use of powerful testimonials.