

The University Cancer Research Fund: North Carolina Arms Researchers for the Battle

ESTABLISHED BY THE NORTH CAROLINA General Assembly last July, the University Cancer Research Fund (UCRF) was created to accelerate the battle against cancer in North Carolina. Well into its first year, the UCRF is shaping a range of cancer initiatives at UNC, many of which will transfer to communities across North Carolina.

“Cancer control is a public health issue,” says UNC School of Public Health Dean Barbara K. Rimer, a member of the UCRF Governance Committee. “The University Cancer Research Fund is tangible evidence that our legislature is committed to invest substantial resources in preventing cancer, finding it early and treating it optimally. Researchers at the UNC School of Public Health are true partners in these initiatives. I’m also thrilled that some of the funds will support students committed to cancer control research.”

The fund—established to accelerate the battle against cancer at UNC-Chapel Hill’s School of Medicine and its Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center—received \$25 million in 2007; \$40 million in 2008; and is slated to receive \$50 million per year beginning in 2009. A number of faculty at the UNC School of Public Health hold faculty appointments at the UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center and the UNC School of Medicine.

The first year of the UCRF is focused on recruiting faculty and staff; developing leading-edge programs and technology; funding innovative grants to fuel future programs and initiatives; and conducting listening sessions to learn the opinions of North Carolina citizens regarding ways that cancer screening, prevention and treatment can be improved in their communities.

Innovative Research in Labs, Clinics and Communities

Dr. Vangie Foshee, associate professor of health behavior and health education at the School of Public Health, received one of 18 Innovation Awards given through the UCRF. She received funding to conduct preliminary studies to determine if contextual factors (i.e., characteristics of the family, peer, school, and neighborhood environments) buffer or exaggerate the influences of genes on the development of adolescent tobacco and alcohol use. Her study will be conducted in two rural counties in North Carolina. Her proposal was reviewed by a team of leading UNC faculty. Foshee’s was one of more than 120 proposals from researchers in nearly 30 departments in the Schools of Public Health, Dentistry, Medicine and Pharmacy, and the College of Arts and Sciences. The team awarded \$2 million for the Innovation Awards and \$500,000 for eight Clinical Innovation Awards.

The Innovation Awards provide “a unique opportunity to support novel, imaginative pilot research projects,” says Dr. Rudy Juliano, professor of pharmacology and chair of the review committee for the awards. “Often such risky work would be difficult to fund by traditional grant mechanisms, but may have the highest potential impact on science, and ultimately on cancer care.” Juliano is principal investigator for the Carolina Center for Nanotechnology Excellence. ►►

Partnering with North Carolina Communities

A key UCRF component involves population scientists who move findings and innovative programs into communities.

“The UCRF funds are critical to promote broad community outreach and dissemination of effective programs for cancer prevention and control as well as cancer survivorship,” says Dr. Marci Campbell, professor of nutrition in the UNC School of Public Health and a program leader for population sciences for the UNC Lineberger/UCRF Program Planning Committee. “The funds will support recruitment of additional senior faculty in key areas such as health communication, dissemination and health outcomes

research. Our recent designation as a Lance Armstrong Foundation Center of Excellence in Cancer Survivorship (see page 54) reflects recognition of our strengths in areas such as community interventions to reduce health disparities, a major priority of UCRF.”

Dr. Andy Olshan, professor and chair of epidemiology in the UNC School of Public Health and leader of UNC Lineberger’s cancer epidemiology program, notes, “The UCRF has already provided critical support to enhance and develop new important initiatives in population sciences by partnering with the North Carolina Central Cancer Registry to expand its capabilities to capture timely and high-quality data on cancer incidence and mortality in North Carolina.

Two new major projects are a cohort study of cancer patients diagnosed and treated at UNC that will provide a tremendous resource for the interdisciplinary examination of survivorship; and an important new study, starting in June 2008, of breast cancer in North Carolina—the Carolina Breast Cancer Study 3. This study will examine the causes and probable outcomes of various types of breast cancer among African American women in North Carolina.

The UCRF is funding numerous other collaborations focused on ensuring that North Carolinians get the best possible cancer care. To read in greater depth about the UCRF, visit: www.cancer.unc.edu/ucrf. ■

– BY DIANNE SHAW AND EMILY J. SMITH