

update

FEBRUARY 18 THROUGH MARCH 4, 2009

NIH awards \$3.2 million for SUNY Upstate weight loss intervention study

SUNY Upstate Medical University researchers are conducting a \$3.2 million NIH-funded study to determine if patients at increased risk for diabetes can successfully lose weight and increase activity levels through a medication-free weight loss program that is delivered by telephone by primary care providers. This study also tests the effectiveness of individual telephone interventions vs. group telephone interventions.

The five-year study “Weight Loss in Primary Care: A Translation of the Diabetes Prevention Program,” or locally titled “The Support, Health Information, Nutrition and Exercise” (SHINE) program, is funded by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

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Ruth Weinstock, MD, PhD, left, discusses the SHINE study with Health Commissioner Richard Daines, MD, right, during his visit to the Joslin Diabetes Center Feb. 10. Listening in are, from left, Pauline Frazier of the state health department;

ment; Paula Trief, PhD, principal investigator with Weinstock on the SHINE study; Richard Heerkens of the state health department; Ruth Franklin, a personal activity nutrition leader; and Phillip S. Schaengold, JD, of University Hospital.

Francesca Pignoni, PhD, to join SUNY Upstate as an Empire Scholar

SUNY Upstate Medical University has recruited Francesca Pignoni, PhD, to join its team of internationally recognized scientists who are studying the complex processes involved in eye formation and function to better understand the causes of blinding conditions and vision disorders.

Dr. Pignoni, who holds NIH-funded grants totaling more than \$3 million, will begin to establish her SUNY Upstate laboratory in June and will join the faculty full-time in September.

She joins SUNY Upstate through the State University of New York Empire Innovation Program that is aimed at

attracting the country’s most talented faculty researchers to SUNY campuses.

Currently on faculty at Harvard Medical School in Boston, she will hold a primary appointment at SUNY Upstate as an Empire Scholar in the Department of Ophthalmology as well as adjunct appointments in SUNY Upstate’s Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and the Department of Neuroscience and Physiology.

“Dr. Pignoni’s addition as an Empire Scholar to our already strong vision research program will enhance a nationally and internationally top tier

vision research effort at SUNY Upstate,” said Steven R. Goodman, PhD, vice president for research and dean of the SUNY Upstate’s College of Graduate Studies.

“Dr. Pignoni has demonstrated excellence, originality and productivity in her area of study,” said Robert Barlow, PhD, professor and director of the Center for Vision Research in the Department of Ophthalmology. “Her research holds promise in better understanding the causes of retinal diseases, such as macular degeneration and related conditions.”

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Dr. Pignoni—*continued from page 1*

One objective of Dr. Pignoni's research is to understand how the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) is specified and how it contributes to the differentiation and growth of the retina. The RPE plays a central role in retinal physiology by forming the outer blood-retinal barrier and supporting the function of photoreceptors. RPE dysfunction is a contributing factor in a number of degenerative eye diseases.

Her current focus is on the study of the Microphthalmia (Mitf) transcription factor, a major player in the formation of an RPE in mouse. She is collaborating with Dr. E. Steingrímsson of the University of Iceland, coordinating efforts by studying the Mitf gene in both mouse and fly. Dr. Pignoni's labo-

ratory is using the *Drosophila* (fruit fly) model system that is widely used to dissect the function of genes and pathways involved in human disease.

Currently, Dr. Pignoni is assistant professor of ophthalmology (genetics) at Harvard Medical School and research associate at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. She earned her bachelor of science degree in biology at Indiana University and her PhD in biology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is presently a permanent member of the Anterior Eye Diseases Study Section that reviews grants proposals for the National Institutes of Health and contributes as editor or ad hoc reviewer to several scientific journals.

The Department of Ophthalmology,

chaired by professor John Hoepner, MD, is home to the Center for Vision Research (CVR), a leading center for research on major eye diseases and vision disorders. Its emphasis is to understand the cell and molecular biology underlying the most prevalent blinding diseases. The center has acquired a total of \$8.5 million in funding from governmental agencies and private foundations and has developed collaborative research efforts with leading scientists at 17 universities in the United States, England, Spain and Japan. CVR research scientists have made important discoveries on the possible causes of retinitis pigmentosa, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and age-related macular degeneration.

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Rev. Terry Culbertson offered the invocation at the Vera House Gala Ball to benefit services to victims of domestic violence Dec. 6 at the Hotel Syracuse. Rev. Culbertson is manager of Spiritual Care, clinical pastoral education supervisor and clinical assistant professor of medicine.

The **Center for Spiritual Care** has joined the membership of the Society of Arts in Healthcare through a grant from Advocates for Upstate Medical University. The society is a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing arts as integral to healthcare. Membership was possible

Pediatric Chaplain **Rev. Louise Tallman Shepard** participated as a Reiki practitioner in a Retreat for Caregivers Dec. 12 at Stella Maris Retreat Center, in Skaneateles.

The **Center for Spiritual Care's pediatric chaplaincy program** received a \$7,500 grant from the Wilbert Foundation for 2009 to fund clergy continuing education and support staff Reiki training in pediatric spiritual care. This grant is awarded to only 16 hospitals in the country.

Sandra St. Germain, RN, BSN, has been appointed as director of Utilization Management for University Hospital. She will also serve as the liaison between University Hospital and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid. St. Germain joined the Utilization Management department in 2001. Her prior experience includes more than 22 years in emergency room nursing.

The **Pathology Residency Program** at SUNY Upstate Medical University has been awarded a five-year accreditation through 2013 by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). The five-year accreditation is the longest accreditation period offered by the ACGME. The accreditation comes after a rigorous review of how SUNY Upstate trains physicians for careers in pathology. The accreditation process requires institutions to complete and submit an extensive written report. An on-site review of the institution also is required.

Members of SUNY Upstate's Center for Development, Behavior, and Genetics will present at the First Spina Bifida World Congress, to be held March 16 to 19 in Orlando. Presenters are: **Greg Liptak, MD**, who

will offer the keynote address; **Kimberlee Garver, SW**; **Mary MacBlane, NP**; **Judith Hodge, RN**; **Nienke Dosa, MD**; **Asure Mahunik**; and **Jennifer Kennedy**.

Dan Dippel, manager of Duplicating and Printing Services, presented a lecture at Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts' Spring Symposium Feb. 18 in the Shemin Auditorium, Shaffer Art Building. A 2000 graduate of Syracuse University, Dippel is best known on the Upstate campus for creating the "three kids" that are the signature of our Golisano Children's Hospital.

**Join Team Upstate
at the Heart Walk
April 18**

**visit
www.upstate.edu/
heartwalk for
more information**