

# Alzheimer's Update

## Making a difference one clinical trial at a time

Leslie Richards and Gregg Olson share how their academic and medical backgrounds helped them make the decision to enroll in clinical trials at OHSU

Deciding to join a clinical trial was easy for Leslie Richards. A former assistant professor and researcher, Richards is enrolled in an anti-tau study at the Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Research Center. Once a month she and her husband Gregg Olson drive from their home in Corvallis to OHSU so that Richards can receive infusions that are a critical part of the clinical trial. After years of leading research studies, mentoring students and publishing papers, she was ready to advocate for research in another way.

"I like participating in research, even if it's not going to benefit me. If you've been a researcher, you kind of owe that back," says Richards.

Six years ago Richards noticed that she started having trouble orientating herself and remembering where she was, especially when traveling around



Richards and Olson both advocate for increased participation in clinical trials

town. She and Olson decided to visit a local neurophysiologist. After undergoing several exams and tests, Richards received an Alzheimer's diagnosis. Unimpressed with the advice they received following the appointment – her local neurologist told them to them to come back

in a year – Olson, a retired nurse, started researching the best hospitals in the U.S. in order to join a clinical trial. Six months later Richards was enrolled in a drug trial at University of California, San Francisco.

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# Training the next generation of researchers

Funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), BUILD (Building Infrastructure Leading to Diversity) EXITO is a 3-year research training program at Portland State University (PSU) designed to train undergraduate students in health science research. This program aims to identify underrepresented students early in their college careers and engage them in finding solutions to today's major health problems. OHSU serves as a research-intensive partner, providing crucial support, guidance, and expertise for EXITO scholars. Currently, there are two EXITO scholars at the Layton Center.



Leslie Tran

Leslie Tran is a pre-med student studying Public Health and Child and Family Studies at PSU. Leslie works with her mentor, Allison Lindauer PhD, APRN on the STELLA Collaborative, a video-conference-based study to advance family education and support. Building upon her experiences, Leslie hopes to pursue her dream of becoming a family practice physician. Leslie states, "Since I became part of the research team at the Layton Center in 2019, it has opened many opportunities for me to engage in the research process, community engagement, and clinical experience."



Michael Nunnerley

Michael Nunnerley joined the Layton Center this August. Michael is studying psychology with an emphasis in neuropsychology at PSU. He hopes to obtain a Master's degree or Ph.D. in the field to help patients with cognitive impairments.

The Layton Center team is committed to supporting early-stage scientists and diversifying the field of dementia specialists. We are proud to be an EXITO partner and look forward to working with Leslie and Michael over the next two years. ■

After a year of infusions, it was clear that the trial was not making a difference. Towards the end of the trial, faculty at UCSF introduced them to Dr. Jeffrey Kaye, MD. Kaye, the Director of the OHSU Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center, mentioned that a new anti-tau trial was starting soon at OHSU. Having access to a neurologist and a new clinical trial closer to home sealed the deal.

"I didn't hesitate a second to get diagnosed, to get treated, to try different avenues. I thought, 'what have I got to lose?'" says Richards.

Richards started her career in research as an undergraduate at Stanford, assisting professors with research projects. After obtaining a doctorate from Cornell University, she joined the Human Development and Family Services department at Oregon State University as an Assistant Professor. She conducted longitudinal studies on rural and low-income communities.

"I've always believed in research," says Richards. "Being in clinical trials, I feel like I'm giving back. It's a way for me of making meaning of where I am."

"I think it's important that she still has agency, that she can feel like she's making a difference," says Olson.

Now Richards and Olson both advocate for increased research participation. Avid hikers, world travelers, and frequent skiers, they met on a Sierra Club service trip near Mt. Robson



Leslie and her dog at OHSU. Her husband Gregg often walks with their dog while waiting for her to receive her monthly infusion.

in British Columbia seventeen years ago. They recently joined a local dementia support group, Dementia Warriors, which includes people with dementia and their care partners. Out of the group's twenty members, they're the only ones currently involved in a trial. Tapping

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into their research and medical backgrounds, they frequently share information about current clinical trials.

"I think patients sometimes have difficulties navigating the intricacies of clinical trials by themselves," says Olson. "I can be pretty forceful about staying on stuff until it happens. As a nurse, I'm used to that. Most people, if the first phone call doesn't work, they don't know what to do."

By getting the word out, Richards and Olson hope that more individuals join clinical trials.

"Don't be afraid of research," says Richards. "There's a lot of good out there and sometimes you have to wade through stuff that doesn't work and then something does work for you. And it can improve your life." ■

## Crossing the threshold of winter

by Allison Lindauer, Ph.D., N.P.

Assistant Professor and Director, Outreach, Recruitment and Education at the Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center



Winter is a difficult season for many in the Pacific Northwest. The days are dark, cold, and wet. Many of us, including our family members with dementia, feel a little lethargic and blue. There are things we can do to fight the winter doldrums – including getting outside – but if you care for a family member with dementia, “getting outside” may be easier said than done. However, staying inside and being inactive can affect mood and sleep and can contribute to evening irritability. Try to spend some time outdoors every day (ideally in the morning). Here are some of my tips for getting outside:

1. Keep your outings simple. Walk around the block or take a 5 minute stroll. As the sky lightens and the weather warms, you'll likely find yourselves outside for even longer.
2. If your family member has some trouble with walking, think about renting (or buying) a transfer chair. This can be lighter and easier to manage than wheelchairs.

3. Bundle up. Invest in good rain coats and shoes for both you and your family member with dementia.
4. Pick a deciduous tree to watch every day. Notice when the buds open up or the leaves peak out. This activity helps give the walks meaning.

The hardest part about going outside is crossing the threshold, from your home to the outdoors. Be positive and confident. If your first outings are simply three steps out of the house, give yourself credit. Each day will be easier.

*Support is available. The best way to find someone who can team up with you is to call a local organization. In Portland, the Multnomah County Family Caregiver Support Program offers help and support, 503-988-3646. The Alzheimer's Association can also be a great source of support, 800-272-3900. Oregon Care Partners offers free caregiver training (on-line and in-person), 1-800-930-6851. ■*

Send me your pictures or comments on Twitter @AllisonLindauer!

## New OHSU Botanical Research Center to study herbs' effect on brain health

The new OHSU Botanical Research Center, established with a five year grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), will examine the properties of two herbs in laboratory studies in the hopes of better understanding their effect on brain health.

Scientists with the Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Research Center will collaborate with the new Center on future clinical studies. The botanicals, gotu kola (*Centella asiatica*) and ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), grow naturally in tropical regions and are two of the most popular dietary supplements sold in the United States.

"The ultimate goal is to do the research that will inform good-quality clinical trials for both of these botanicals," says Amala Soumyanath, Ph.D., director of the center and associate professor of neurology in the OHSU School of Medicine. "We expect to clarify and expand on traditional knowledge about these herbs' effects on measures such as mood, sleep, and memory."

Botanical dietary supplements vary significantly in their chemical properties. "How and where they were grown, what part of the plant was used, how they were processed, and amount per dose – all of these things will affect the constituents

in that product and its efficacy," Soumyanath says. "Improving our knowledge about how they work, and their important constituents would lead to more reliable and effective dietary supplements."

Center researchers will investigate the chemical and biological properties of each botanical to investigate which components are responsible for its beneficial effects. The researchers also aim

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to identify specific biological biomarkers that relate to how the botanicals work. Future clinical trials would determine whether these biomarkers can be measured through blood tests or magnetic imaging of the brain in humans.

The new Center will also amplify some research initiatives already underway at the OHSU School of Medicine. Dr. Soumyanath and Nora Gray, Ph.D., assistant professor



Amala Soumyanath B.Pharm., Ph.D.,  
Program Director, BENFRA Botanical  
Dietary Supplements Research Center

of neurology, will extend their prior laboratory work examining gotu kola's role in potential clinical treatments of cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's disease. Dr. Soumyanath, together with Dr. Joseph Quinn, professor of neurology, and Dr. Kirsten Wright, assistant professor of neurology, have already begun Phase 1 clinical trials of gotu kola.

The OHSU Botanical Research Center is a collaboration between OHSU, Oregon State University, the University of Mississippi and Redmond-based Oregon's Wild Harvest. OHSU is one of three NIH-supported botanical dietary supplement research centers across the country. ■

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## Highlights from the Alzheimer's Association International Conference 2020

by Sara Kofman, Public Policy Director,  
Alzheimer's Association Oregon and Southwest Washington Chapter

This past July, more than 33,000 registered attendees from over 160 countries came together for the Alzheimer's Association International Conference (AAIC) — the world's largest and most influential international meeting dedicated to advancing dementia science. Due to the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Association decided to host the conference

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virtually – for the first time in its history – at no cost to the global science community and many others. With record-setting attendance, AAIC reached new heights in 2020. More than 60% of attendees were women – a record – and more than 70% of attendees were first-timers.

As an Oregonian, it was inspiring to see a strong presence of diverse research from OHSU's Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Center. Local research efforts contributed to a number of key takeaways that excited the larger research community and gave hope to the millions of families affected by Alzheimer's and dementia.

Some particularly compelling developments from AAIC 2020 included: the role of flu and pneumonia vaccines in possibly reducing the risk of developing Alzheimer's; progress on a blood test for Alzheimer's, which may be able to detect the disease 20 years before symptoms occur;

and identifying Alzheimer's risk factors that appear as early as adolescence and young adulthood, including obesity, diabetes and quality of education.

The dedication of researchers from OHSU and other institutions across our county and the world show us that there is a growing legion of researchers dedicated to the fight against Alzheimer's disease. In this exciting time in Alzheimer's and dementia research, scientists continue the momentum necessary to advance new discoveries, even in the face of a global pandemic. As 2020 comes to a close, I am filled with hope as we continue to work toward a world without Alzheimer's and all other dementia. ■

Learn more at  
[www.alz.org/AAIC](http://www.alz.org/AAIC)

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## A personal perspective

Patrice Fuller, B.S.

Senior Research Assistant, Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center



If you were to state four years ago that I'd be one of the lead researchers of several Black dementia studies at OHSU, I would've thought that was a hoax.

As a Portland native, I started my journey at Pacific University to pursue my degree in exercise science with a minor in psychology. Once I was there for about a semester, I realized that there are other options that combine my passion for neuroscience and healing. I intensely researched different aspects of the field including neuropsychopharmacology, sense and perception, and memory. During this period, I noticed a trend in my community—its members not being represented respectfully within neuroscience data. This shift in focus helped me understand how I can use my talents to help improve community health within my Portland Black community.

After graduating with my Bachelor's I eventually found a research assistant position at the Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease

Center at OHSU with Dr. Raina Croff and joined her Sharing History through Active Reminiscence and Photo-imagery (SHARP) project. SHARP was a great opportunity for me to explore the effects of racism and gentrification on memory loss within the Black population, a personal and academic interest of mine. After being on the project for two months, a research coordinator position opened up within the well-known African American Dementia and Aging Project (AADAPt) at the Layton Center and I joined the team.

Being in these two roles has shown me the importance of having a solid representation of Black people within research data and how we must adapt our medical philosophy to incorporate cultural nuances to get accurate methods for treatment and diagnostic tools. Due to the history of how Black people were treated unethically in research studies, providing space for my participants to express themselves during a visit and building a relationship with them and their loved ones are among the most

important features of my position. Some of my other duties include recruiting participants, scheduling, administering assessments, and processing and analyzing data. Even though this role can be a bit rigorous from time to time, the support from my immediate study team has been phenomenal. Without them, these projects wouldn't be as renowned as they are today.

I don't just work with my community, I'm part of it. It is part of what makes me, me. Outside of my work days, I enjoy spending time with my grandmother, listening to music, reading spirituality literature, exploring different cuisines, and developing my bartending skills. ■

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## The C. Rex and Ruth H. Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center

The Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center is one of the 31 NIA Alzheimer's Disease Centers in the U.S. and the only one of its kind in Oregon. Our center is recognized as a national leader in dementia care and research, and is committed to serving the needs of people throughout the Northwest.

The Layton Center is a part of the OHSU Brain Institute (OBI). OBI is a national leader in neuroscience patient care, research and education.

For more information, contact the Layton Center at 503-494-6976. To subscribe go to our website [www.ohsu.edu/alzheimers](http://www.ohsu.edu/alzheimers) or call 503-494-6370

### Our team

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## Help us take on the impossible

The C. Rex and Ruth H. Layton Aging and Alzheimer's Disease Center is dedicated to the study and treatment of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

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