



Neurology News & Notes

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Message from the Chair

Welcome to the newest feature of the University of Pittsburgh Department of Neurology – *Neurology News & Notes*. This newsletter will be an internal, department-wide publication with the purpose of sharing news and accomplishments with our colleagues.

In the aftermath of the strictest restrictions of the pandemic, it’s vital that we begin to reconnect with one another by sharing accomplishments not everyone may know about.

With a department as large and as talented as ours, there is no doubt important happenings have slipped under the radar and gone unrecognized. Going forward, *Neurology News & Notes* will be a place to share news and celebrate accomplishments with the rest of our colleagues.

I look forward to transforming and expanding this newsletter into something great as we come together as a department to celebrate the accomplishments of everyone in the department.

Page B. Pennell, MD, FAES

Chair and Henry B. Higman Professor of Neurology



Department Physicians Take Part in Groundbreaking U.S. Clinical Trial

David Lacomis, MD, University of Pittsburgh Department of Neurology professor, will serve as the co-principal investigator at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) for the first U.S. clinical trial of a brain-computer interface.

UPMC is aiming to enroll three initial quadriplegic patients for this coming fall, and Dr. Lacomis says that this is a life-changing opportunity for them. In addition to creating a better quality of life, this kind of technology will reduce caregiver burden.

UPMC and Mount Sinai Hospital in New York will be the first to test the device, made by a New York City-based company called Synchron. Brain-computer interfaces allow a substitute for finger keyboard interactions for people that are paralyzed and don’t have the use of their fingers. It also replaces voice recognition, which isn’t available on all devices. For many people who are paralyzed, a brain-computer interface allows a seamless, eye-tracking way to communicate and use the computer.





In addition to Dr. Lacomis as the co-principal investigator, there are two other department physicians involved in the trial. Tawfiq Al-Lahham, MD, department assistant professor, will be involved with recruitment and monitoring patients and Sandra Narayanan, MD, department associate professor will implant the device and monitor its safety. Melissa Ilnicki, RRT, RPSGT, is the research coordinator.

Dr. Lacomis says that eventually, “Someone could turn on their own lights, turn on their own TV, change the channels, turn on the stereo and us robotic arms. All sorts of things could be done with this technology.”

The device will need to undergo several more years of testing before the Food and Drug Administration can approve its commercial distribution.

Rocha Named Pitt Pepper Scholar

Marcelo Rocha, MD, PhD, University of Pittsburgh Department of Neurology associate professor, has been announced as one of the three new Pepper Scholars by the University of Pittsburgh Pepper Center for 2022.

The Pepper Scholar programs support junior faculty members in an area related to mobility, balance and aging while they seek their first independent level funding. Dr. Rocha’s research interests focus on the management, diagnosis and prevention of acute stroke. By becoming a Pepper Scholar at the University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Rocha will receive a training program that focuses on providing career development activities, education and training opportunities and support for his pilot research.

The Pepper Center works to promote the development of new investigators by helping them gain scientific knowledge leading to the establishment of independence in older persons. New investigators achieve this goal primarily through developing new ways to optimize balance and mobility.

The University of Pittsburgh Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence Center is one of fourteen Centers throughout the United States funded by the National Institute on Aging. The Pepper Center promotes independence among older Americans by optimizing balance and mobility and reducing injurious falls through disciplined inquiry and translational research. They strive to increase scientific knowledge that will lead to better ways to maintain or restore independence to older persons.

Department Researchers Receive Awards from AHA

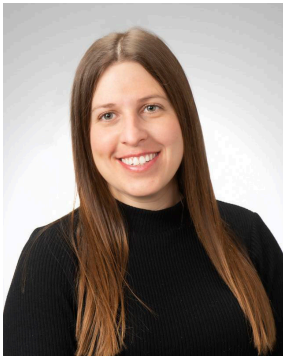
Hongjian Pu, MD, and Shanshan Song, MD, research assistant professors with the University of Pittsburgh Department of Neurology, have both received Career Development Awards from the American Heart Association.

Dr. Pu received the award for his grant “Adiponectin ameliorates chronic hypoperfusion induced vascular dementia.” Dr. Song received the award for her grant “Modulating microglia-oligodendrocyte interactions for white matter repair.” She will be studying the mechanisms of microglia-oligodendrocyte interactions on white matter remyelination and neurological function recovery after ischemic stroke.

Over the course of the three-year grants, Drs. Pu and Song will both receive a total amount of \$231,000 in research support.



The Career Development Award is a prestigious grant that supports a junior faculty's career development, allowing them to explore research questions or studies that will bolster future success as an independent scientist.



Beckwith Center Names Steinberg Shared Decision-Making Fellow

Alexis M. Steinberg, MD, an assistant professor with the University of Pittsburgh Department of Neurology and Critical Care, has been named a Shared Decision Making Fellow as a part of The Beckwith's Center for Shared Decision Making at UPMC.

Established by the Wolff Center and UPMC Health Plan in 2019, the Beckwith Center for Shared Decision Making was created to facilitate more effective shared decision making (SDM) throughout all types of care across the UPMC Enterprise.

The goal of the program is to transform patient care culture by removing SDM barriers and providing resources that will help have a greater impact on patients and other UPMC Health Plan members. When patients feel confident and at ease with their provider, the health care experience is better for both parties.

The fellowship, which is supported by a stipend, is a two-year commitment that is built on collaboration and experiential learning. As the program evolves, feedback and guidance from Fellows will be highly anticipated.

Medical Student Spotlight

Congratulations to first-year medical student John Bielamin, who's proposal on conducting traumatic brain injury related research has been accepted by the Dean's Summer Research Program (DSRP)! The DSRP, which comes with a stipend of \$3,800, is awarded to medical students completing research between their first and second years of medical school.

Tritan J. Plute, first-year medical student, had his second paper with department accepted for presentation at 2022 American Academy of Neurology Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington! Plute's platform presentation titled "Real-Time & Passive Localization of the Epileptic Network Based on Single Pulse Electrical Stimulation: Correlation with the standard of care and surgical outcomes" was presented on Sunday, April 3.

