

SPRING 2026

Chemotherapy Breakthrough

Tiny particles. Big impact. Pitt Pharmacy research is redefining how chemotherapy reaches—and treats—cancer. P. 12

From Experience

How we're building confident, practice-ready professionals starting on day one. P. 16

Community Service and Support

Turning evidence into action. Pitt Pharmacy advances data-driven solutions to the opioid crisis. P. 24

PITT PHARMACY

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#PittDayofGiving #PDoG26

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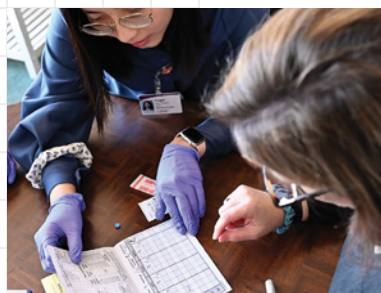
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Chemotherapy Breakthrough

Pitt Pharmacy researcher Song Li is using nanoparticles to deliver chemotherapy with unprecedented precision—opening new possibilities for treating some of the most aggressive cancers.



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Community Service and Support

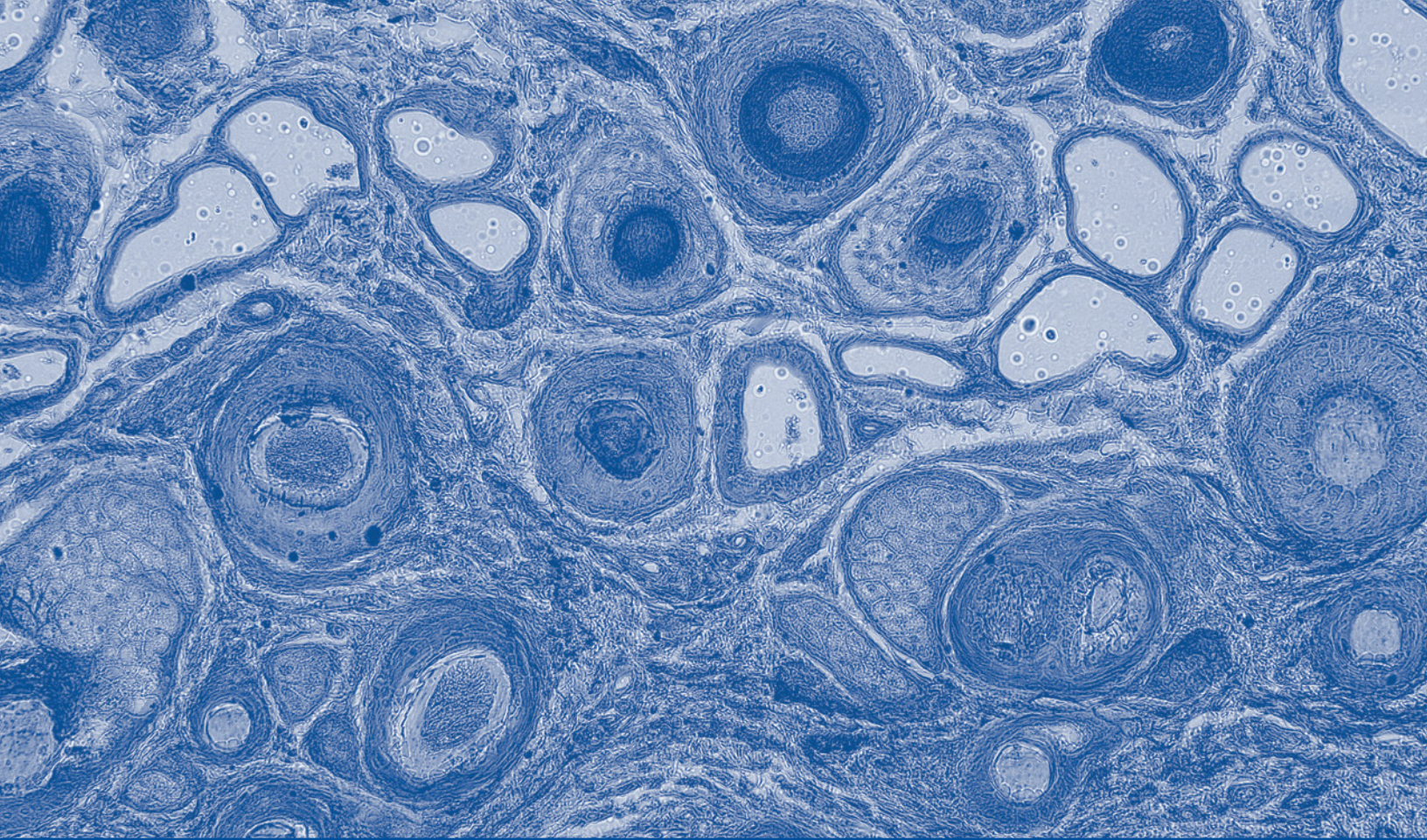
Building on a legacy of multifaceted, data-driven research and initiatives, Pitt Pharmacy's Implementation and Research Center for Healthy Communities is helping to create a healthier future for those in Western Pennsylvania and beyond.



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Global Impact

At Pitt Pharmacy, students who pursue the global health area of concentration are broadening their horizons and redefining "access to care."



SCHOOL OF PHARMACY LEADERSHIP

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PITT PHARMACY MAGAZINE

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Mission: Pitt Pharmacy magazine is your window into industry insights, school updates and standout accomplishments from faculty, staff, trainees and alumni who continue advancing the profession.

Cover: Dr. Song Li in his lab.
Photography by Rayni Shiring, University of Pittsburgh

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Why Pitt Pharmacy?

What sets Pitt Pharmacy apart from others nationwide? How are we preparing our students for the future? What are we doing to ensure they are prepared to care for and serve patients in new and dynamic ways?

These are the questions we set out to answer in the new and improved spring 2026 edition of Pitt Pharmacy magazine. One story from this issue focuses on our experiential learning program and the expanding role of pharmacists (p. 16). It's a piece that demonstrates the importance of pharmacy practice and how quickly we get our students experience working with patients in our community. It also shows how these experiences help students expand their understanding of the roles pharmacists can play and all the different places their career can take them.

We believe it's vital to expose students to as many different career paths as possible. It's one of the many aspects of our program that sets Pitt apart.

An education from Pitt Pharmacy means learning through the experience of caring for people. All our students receive a guided, personalized education that ensures they are a medication expert who is practice ready at graduation. Through each class, experience or rotation, we are also helping students develop their own leadership style. This is of paramount importance because when our students become alumni we expect them to set the standard in providing care for the communities they serve.

Thank you for being a part of the Pitt Pharmacy family. Your stories, work and support help us continue to lead in educating and developing the next generation of pharmacy students.

Hail to Pitt!

Amy L. Seybert, PharmD

Dean, University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy

Dr. Gordon J. Vanscoy Endowed Chair of Pharmacy

NEWS *and* NOTES

TOP 10

Top Ranked

Once again, the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy is one of the **top 10** schools for research funding! According to the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, Pitt is 7th in the country for total number of grants. In 2024, the school was awarded a total of \$31,591,370. The school also rose again in the National Institutes of Health (NIH) rankings, underscoring the strength and impact of Pitt Pharmacy's research community.



Gather Round

The official podcast of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Pharmacy is just warming up. "Pharmside Chat," hosted by Assistant Professor **Aaron Devanathan**, has launched! The first episode featured an interview with Dean Amy L. Seybert, who shared insight into the school, her background and her leadership.

In each episode, Devanathan will explore success stories directly from the people who drive excellence at Pitt Pharmacy. Tune in on YouTube.



Near and Far

Dean Amy L. Seybert has been traveling throughout Pennsylvania, connecting with the Pitt Pharmacy community and celebrating members' achievements at alumni dinners. Last fall, she went to both Altoona and Erie. In Altoona, she even got to congratulate Greg Drew, the now-retired president and chairman of Value Drug Company, as he was awarded a lifetime achievement award from the Blair County Chamber of Commerce.

"Thanks to everyone who joined us," says Seybert. "It is so good to be with the Pitt Pharmacy family."



Scholarship Success

Kayleigh Moyer, a third-year PharmD student, was recently awarded a 2025 Kappa Psi Foundation Scholarship. Funded by the pharmaceutical fraternity, this national scholarship goes to selected members in high academic standing and recognizes Moyer for her outstanding leadership and dedication to service.



Lauded Lab

The Wu Lab, led by **Qihao Wu**, assistant professor of pharmaceutical sciences, has been awarded a Competitive Medical Research Fund grant, supported by UPMC. This funding will support the lab's research on gut microbial metabolism of dietary phytochemicals and its impact on host physiology—work that contributes to advancing precision nutrition and microbiome-based therapeutic strategies.

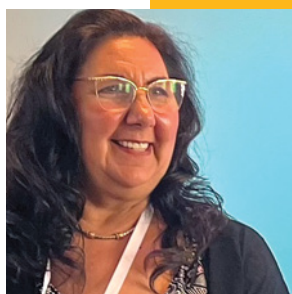
The Wu Lab also recently published two papers in the Journal of the American Chemical Society in collaboration with colleagues in the Li Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. Both papers advance natural-product discovery for human health. One focuses on the discovery and biosynthetic interrogation of cobaltrubin, a rare cobalt-containing metabolite with antiviral activity in cell assays. The other focuses on a chimeric polyketide family that yields cancer-immunogenic chemotherapeutic leads.



Bench and Beyond

Simone Brixius-Anderko, assistant professor of pharmaceutical sciences, received the 2025 Bench Research Excellence Award for Junior Investigators from the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, Biological Sciences section.

The award recognizes her research on human cytochrome P450 fatty acid omega hydroxylases and their role in human health and disease, as well as her commitment to mentoring the next generation of scientists.



Selected Speaker

The American Society of Consultant Pharmacists invited **Christine M. Ruby**, assistant professor of pharmacy and therapeutics, to be a speaker at the organization's mid-Atlantic meeting in Arlington, Virginia.

Ruby, who is also a clinical pharmacy specialist in geriatrics at UPMC Senior Care Institute, shared her insights on the latest approaches to managing age-related brain disorders. Her presentation was titled "Update in the Management of Alzheimer's Disease: An Age-Friendly Approach."

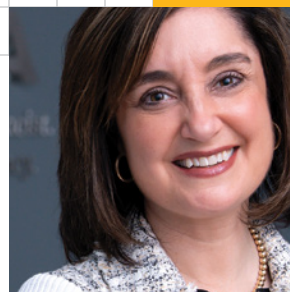
Separately, Ruby presented a poster in November at the University of Pittsburgh Aging Institute 16th Annual Research Day on Aging. Made in collaboration with colleagues including Erin Suhrie, a clinical pharmacist at UPMC, the presentation was titled "Evaluation of Gabapentin Prescribing in Outpatient Older Adults."



Star Power

John Dubnansky, research project manager, was awarded the Rising Star Award at the Health Sciences Research Administration fall 2025 event in October.

The award is presented to those employed for less than three years who consistently exceed expectations, are motivated to achieve top performance, and display a positive and service-oriented approach.



Future Forward

Melissa McGivney, professor and associate dean for student success and professional initiatives at Pitt Pharmacy, served as an invited coauthor for the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Argus Commission Forecast for 2025.

The Forecast is a feature of AACP's strategic plan, forecasting the future of pharmacy practice, education and research and supporting the strategic planning of colleges and schools of pharmacy nationwide. McGivney collaborated with colleagues Craig Cox (Texas Tech University) and Brian Hemstreet (University of North Carolina) on the advancing practice section, which focuses on timely issues around scope of practice, payment for pharmacist-provided care, and workforce development.



Small but Mighty Discoveries

Sheida Dabiri, a PharmD student in Song Li's laboratory, delivered a podium presentation in the Nanomedicine and Nanoscale Delivery section at the 2025 Annual Meeting of the Controlled Release Society (CRS). Her presentation showcased innovative research in nanotechnology-based drug delivery systems for cancer therapy, emphasizing strategies to improve the precision and effectiveness of treatment. This recognition highlights both the impact of her work and her growing contributions to the field of pharmaceutical science.

Shangyu Chen, a postdoctoral research associate in Li's lab, also presented at the CRS meeting. He showcased innovative advances in nanotechnology-based drug delivery systems for cancer therapy.

Learn more about nanotechnology and Song Li's lab on page 12.



Luminous Leader

Sydney Stawarz, Pitt Pharmacy's Community Leadership and Research Fellow, was recognized as the 2024-25 Top CPESN NextGen Luminary Leader at the National Community Pharmacy Association Annual Meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The recognition is a part of CPESN USA's Leadership Initiative designed to empower community pharmacy professionals across the country. The Next Generation Luminary group represents residents, fellows and practicing pharmacists charting new practice and payment models.



New Publication

Haocheng Tang, a PharmD student in Junmei Wang's laboratory, has developed a groundbreaking AI model named SiteAF3. Built upon AlphaFold3, SiteAF3 outperforms its predecessor in accurately predicting receptor-ligand complex structures, particularly for challenging cases such as allosteric drugs and orphan proteins. This work was recently published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.



Scholar Award

Brooke Sargent is one of only 20 students selected from around the country for the second cohort of the Community Pharmacy Student Scholars program, sponsored by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy Transformation Center and the Academia-Community Transformation Pharmacy Collaborative. She was selected alongside her faculty mentor, Assistant Professor Sophia Herbert, and practice mentor, Sydney Stawarz, a community leadership and research fellow at Pitt Pharmacy.

The program is designed to facilitate a deeper understanding of career paths in community pharmacy by bringing together student pharmacists through asynchronous learning modules, mentorship, networking and more.



Community Credit

PharmD student **Nina Yang** recently received the CVS Health Foundation/American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy Community Pharmacy Award. Funded by the CVS Health Foundation, the award grants \$20,000 in educational expenses in recognition of recipients' commitment to improving health outcomes and the well-being of individual patients in communities across the United States.

Yang has been an active student leader in the School of Pharmacy, holding leadership roles in various organizations. She is currently a Class of 2026 class representative and Panther Clinic lead.



Follow Her

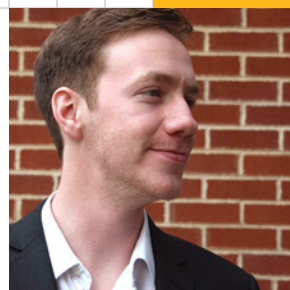
Third-year PharmD student **Alexis Alexander** is one of 30 collegiate members from around the country selected for the 2025-26 Phi Lambda Sigma (PLS) Leader Academy. This fully funded five-month program is designed to help emerging leaders take their skills to the next level. Through a combination of mentorship, hands-on challenges, self-reflection and practical exercises, members will strengthen their leadership capacity and gain tools to expand their influence both professionally and personally.

Alexander says that she hopes her participation will bring fresh insights, energy and inspiration to Pitt Pharmacy's PLS chapter and the broader school community.



Exclusive Opportunity

Yulie Kim, a PharmD student, was chosen for a highly selective shadowing opportunity with the biopharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences, in collaboration with the Academy of Managed Care Pharmacists (AMCP). She traveled to Foster City, California, for an in-person experience at Gilead's headquarters. Only three students from each AMCP affiliate are chosen to represent their region.



Challenge Accepted

In collaboration with professors Christian Fernandez and Junmei Wang, **Cameron Noval**, a second-year PharmD student, was selected as one of the 15 fall 2025 cohort awardees for the Pitt Un-Challenge through the Clinical and Translational Science Institute.

The award supports Noval's project focused on developing improved strategies for the early detection of pancreatic cancer, with the broader goal of enabling earlier intervention for high-risk patients. The project brings together clinical insights, machine learning and translational research to advance more accurate and accessible diagnostic tools. ■

SHARE YOUR NEWS!

Don't keep good news to yourself. We love to hear and circulate updates from Pitt Pharmacy faculty, staff, students and alumni. Spread the word at **pharmacy.pitt.edu/news/request**.



Relevant Results

Written by Laura Clark Rohrer

A PRESTIGIOUS FELLOWSHIP IS HELPING THIS PITT PHARMACY PHD CANDIDATE IMPROVE CARE FOR PATIENTS RECEIVING LEUKEMIA TREATMENT.

It was one of the most meaningful moments Yin Zhu has experienced in her academic career.

The year was 2021 and the Pitt Pharmacy PhD candidate was working in the lab of Christian Fernandez, her primary advisor. After months of research, Zhu and her colleagues had uncovered evidence that a crucial drug used to treat leukemia can activate cells responsible for liver scarring in some patients. The discovery would lead the team toward better understandings of drug-induced liver injuries and the populations more likely to encounter such complications during cancer treatments.

"It made me feel like I was contributing something real and potentially clinically relevant," recalls Zhu.

Making a difference in pharmacology and in patient outcomes has long been important to Zhu. She was in high school in her hometown of Seattle, Washington, when she first became interested in the work of pharmacy.

She wanted to help.

As she advanced in her studies, Zhu channeled that service-minded spirit into a passion for bridging the gap between laboratory discoveries and the real-world impact on patients. That's what helped bring her to Fernandez's lab at Pitt, where her work recently earned her a prestigious honor.

The National Institutes of Health and the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases has awarded Zhu the Predoctoral Individual National Research Service Award (F31) for her work titled "Mechanistic studies of amino acid deprivation-induced hepatic fibrosis."

The distinguished fellowship will fund her dissertation research into advancing preclinical pharmacology and translational approaches to improve treatment outcomes for patients with leukemia.

She's excited for the opportunity the fellowship provides to shape a training plan tailored to her own development. And she credits Fernandez and her committee members for helping her earn it.

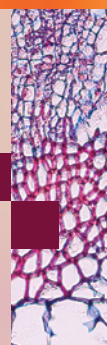
"Dr. Fernandez has played a central role in providing scientific guidance, helping me refine my research direction, and consistently encouraging me to pursue opportunities," says Zhu.

With the F31 fellowship and the continued collaborative support of her instructors and peers at Pitt Pharmacy, Zhu is already well on her way to achieving her goal of a career focused on translational research—and many more meaningful moments of discovery. ■



"This new role for PXR gives us a fresh target for thinking about therapies. It's exciting because PXR is already a protein that drugs can hit."

—Da Yang



A PITT PROFESSOR'S RESEARCH IS BREAKING NEW GROUND ON A FAMILIAR PROTEIN.

Journey of Discovery

Written by Rhea Bowman

For more than a decade, Pitt Pharmacy Professor of Pharmaceutical Sciences Da Yang has been standing at the forefront of discovery, earning international recognition for his work blending computational biology, pharmacogenomics and experimental pharmacology. His mission? To uncover how genetic changes shape cancer development and treatment options.

Yang has created a highly visible, well-funded research program since joining Pitt Pharmacy in 2014. He has produced nearly 100 peer-reviewed publications and generated 20,000 citations worldwide—a testament to his international impact.

Most recently, his team published a study shedding light on a novel revelation about a familiar protein, pregnane X receptor (PXR).

Published in Nature Structural & Molecular Biology, this groundbreaking research reveals new functions for the protein—already a target for modern drugs—that could alter the way we target and treat cancer in patients.

PXR, which works by regulating drug metabolism through cytochrome P450 enzymes, was previously believed to work only inside the cell nucleus. However, Yang's team discovered that the protein also works in the cytoplasm of the cell, where it increases the glucose intake of cells and may work to encourage tumor growth. This discovery reveals a surprising new role for PXR, with potential implications for cancer and metabolic diseases.

"This new role for PXR gives us a fresh target for thinking about therapies," says Yang, a senior author of the study. "It's exciting because PXR is already a protein that drugs can hit."

Beyond the laboratory, Yang is the principal investigator on multiple National Institutes of Health (NIH) R01 grants, serves on NIH and American Cancer Society study sections, and is a key member of The Cancer Genome Atlas project.

Yang has trained more than 30 graduate students, fellows and visiting scholars, many of whom have received prestigious recognition because of his mentorship.

Collaborative and driven, he is shaping the future of research one discovery at a time. ■



RECONNECTING THROUGH ALUMNI EVENTS

BUILDING BONDS



The fall semester provided several opportunities to renew connections with the Pitt Pharmacy family.

More than 300 alumni attended Health Sciences Alumni Weekend in September to reconnect with their Pitt peers and talk directly with deans, faculty members, students and staff. All health sciences alumni were invited to the Welcome Back Reception at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens and a Pirates game at beautiful PNC Park. This year, Health Sciences Alumni Weekend was not held in conjunction with Pitt Homecoming, which allowed attendees more time to attend a series of intimate events with colleagues.



The School of Pharmacy hosted an exclusive happy hour with Dean Amy L. Seybert at The Porch at Schenley in Oakland. Topics of discussion included the school's many successes, including enrollment, a recently completed accreditation phase (for which the school received full accreditation with no monitoring from the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education) and how alumni can get involved.

In December, alumni, students, faculty, staff and friends were delighted to reunite at the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Mid-Year Reception. Held at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, the event provided another opportunity to reconnect, network and celebrate collective achievements.



If you would like to learn more about ways to engage with the School of Pharmacy throughout the year, contact Associate Director of Alumni Relations Halle Angelo at halleangelo@pitt.edu. The school appreciates alumni input on how they want to be contacted, how they would prefer to get involved and their areas of expertise. ■

Stay in the loop on upcoming Pitt Pharmacy events near you by following the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

Photo: Dean Marnie Oakley, Director of Development
Emily Mente, Dean Amy L. Seybert

OF SERVICE

HONORING MARCIA BORRELLI'S DECADES-LONG DEDICATION TO PITT PHARMACY

For more than 25 years at Pitt Pharmacy, Marcia Borrelli has personally guided thousands of students and families from recruitment through graduation and beyond. Now, the director of student services is preparing for a well-earned retirement.

Borrelli has been described by many as “Pharmacy Mom,” a bright light and cheerleader for student success. Since assuming her position, she has counseled countless potential students on how to prepare for pharmacy school, checked on hundreds of students throughout their studies, helped those struggling with coursework and nurtured student growth.

Borrelli first came to Pitt as an administrative assistant in 1998 before assuming her current position in 2005. Ever since, her can-do attitude, depth of knowledge and reassuring presence have been mainstays at Pitt Pharmacy.

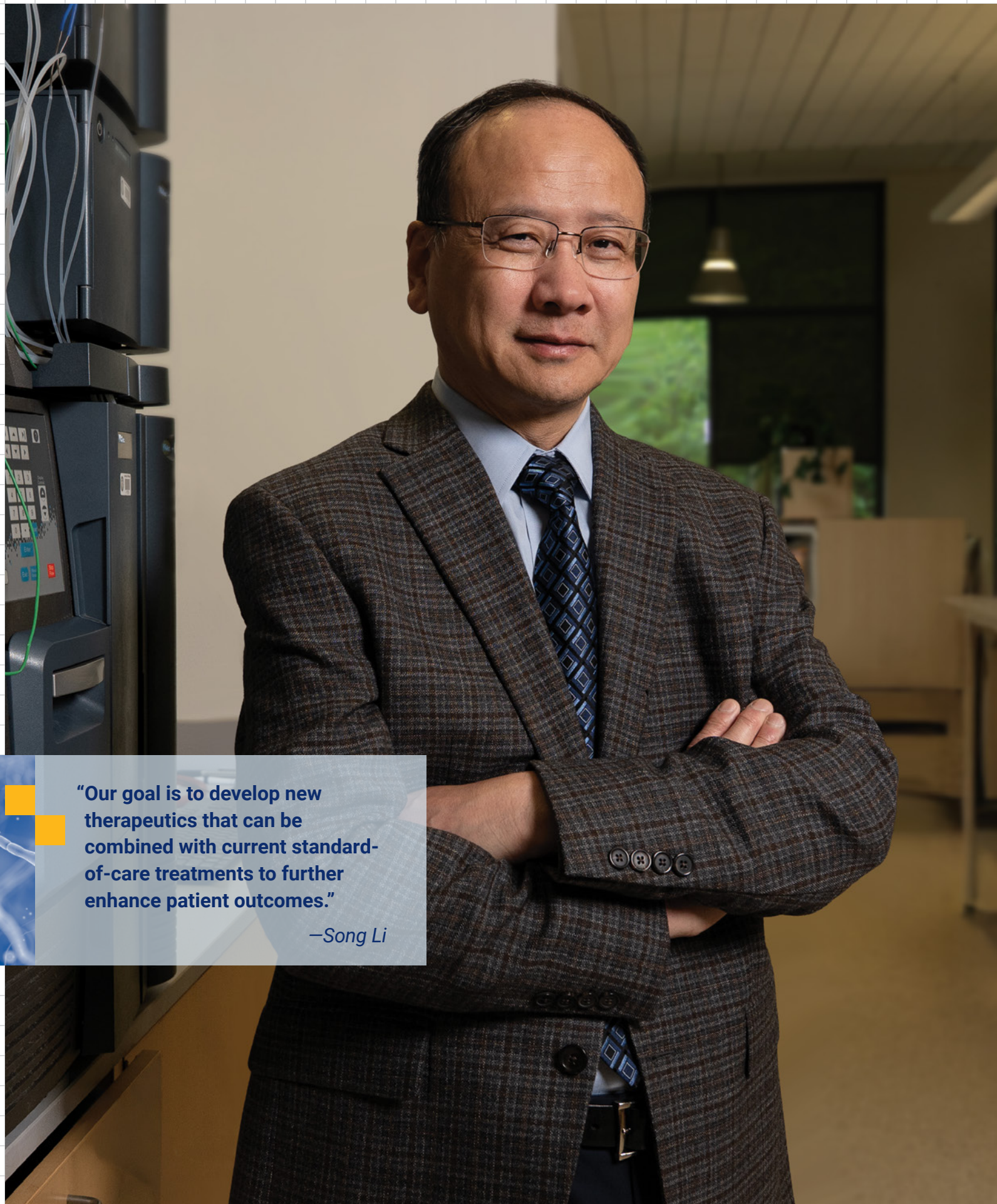
“When [students] meet with us, I think we give them a sense of, ‘We’re in this together, and we’re going to help you get through this,’” she told the University Times in 2020 for an article honoring her efforts.

That is certainly the supportive feeling alumnus Ukwen Akpoji (PHARM ’13, ’15) received from Borrelli. He credits her with encouraging him to pursue Pitt pre-pharmacy courses after high school. Borrelli served as one of his mentors and ultimately, he says, shaped his successful career path. He currently serves as the U.S. associate medical director in neurology for Alexion Pharmaceuticals, Inc., in Boston, Massachusetts.

Akpoji made sure to share his gratitude for Borrelli with the alumni community in 2024, when he was named a Rising Star awardee at the RxTravaganza gala.

“Marcia’s impact on the Pitt Pharmacy community is truly immeasurable,” says Dean Amy L. Seybert. “She leaves a remarkable impression on all who interact with her. I am so grateful for her years of service.”

Upon her retirement, Marcia is looking forward to spending time with family and friends—especially her four grandchildren, Maeve, Maverick, Atlas and Cecilia. ■



"Our goal is to develop new therapeutics that can be combined with current standard-of-care treatments to further enhance patient outcomes."

—Song Li



CHEMOTHERAPY BREAKTHROUGH

TARGETING TUMORS THROUGH NANOMEDICINE LEADS TO BIG RESULTS.

A new chemotherapy delivery system developed at the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy is promising to transform cancer treatment and patient outcomes for the better. The key, according to researcher Song Li, lies in particles so small they cannot be seen by the naked eye.

Written by Lindy Kravec

Li, David and Betty Brenneman Professor and director of the Center for Pharmacogenetics at Pitt Pharmacy, has spent more than 30 years researching and developing nanoparticles—extremely tiny specks of matter that, in Li's research, are designed to carry medicines safely and precisely into the body in a way that traditional methods cannot.

Recently, he and his team have zeroed in on using nanoparticles to treat pancreatic cancer and other aggressive forms of the disease that are difficult to treat due to dense, shield-like tissue barriers around the tumors. According to Li's research, the nanoparticles are capable of penetrating these tumors and delivering targeted chemotherapy.

Nanoparticles are made by combining materials like fats, polymers or metals at very small scales. When used for cancer treatment, nanoparticles are often loaded with chemotherapy and/or immunotherapy drugs inside or on their surface. These mini delivery vehicles are able to target specific tissues, such as tumors, so that more of the medicine reaches the right place while reducing side effects.

In preclinical studies, Li's approach to pancreatic tumors significantly improved drug delivery and tumor response compared to conventional treatments.

Li's innovation requires both a combination of different therapeutics and a unique delivery system.

"Combination therapy is widely used in disease treatment, particularly in cancer, as tumors are highly adaptive and can quickly develop resistance to single-agent therapies," says Li. "In addition to designing nanoparticles for improved drug delivery, we are also focused on uncovering the mechanisms underlying therapy resistance."

"Our goal is to develop new therapeutics that can be combined with current standard-of-care treatments to further enhance patient outcomes," he continues.

Li has a career-long history of applying innovative solutions to pharmaceutical and scientific challenges. He has more than 220 peer-reviewed publications to his credit and continues to break new ground.

"I think of myself as the interface of biology, immunology and biotechnology," says Li. "I am always trying to understand the underlying problem and then go to work to solve it."

Educated as a medical doctor at the Fourth Military Medical University in Xi'an, China, Li practiced as a gastroenterologist prior to earning a PhD in cancer immunotherapy. His keen interest in patient outcomes fueled his interest in drug-delivery research.

Early in his career, he focused on developing antibody-drug conjugates (ADCs) for treating gastric cancer. "Today, several ADCs have been approved for clinical use," says Li. "This underscores the translational potential of this research."

His interest shifted to nanoparticles in 1994 when, as a postdoctoral fellow, he joined the laboratory of Leaf Huang, the former director of the Center for Pharmacogenetics at Pitt.

"The University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy is at the forefront of transforming health through research in drug discovery, development, translation, implementation and outcomes research."

—Amy L. Seybert

"I was particularly drawn to nanoparticles because of their markedly higher drug-loading capacity and versatility in therapeutic delivery," Li recalls. He has since spent years exploring the possibilities.

"The work we're doing now to develop the technology to make particles really small is very exciting," says Li. "When we actively target tumors, we're able to bring the needed chemotherapy cargo directly to the inside of a cell—right where we need it."

In addition to their use in cancer therapy, nanoparticles can be used in vaccines such as the mRNA COVID-19 vaccine and in medical imaging. Li is also exploring their use in gene therapy, with potential applications in both cancer and other diseases.

Chien-Yu Chen, a Pitt doctoral student in pharmaceutical sciences, has a special interest in developing gene and drug delivery systems. Working in Li's lab, she can identify targets, design delivery strategies and study how different systems influence tumor biology.

"Gene delivery, such as Dr. Li's work with nanoparticles, enables target modulation without traditional pharmacological inhibitors, which could result in more flexible treatment possibilities," explains Chen.

In 2020, Li's scientific endeavors led him to cofound Duo Oncology, an oncologist-funded start-up company that grew out of University of Pittsburgh research and is dedicated to bringing innovative cancer treatments to market.

To date, the company has completed efficacy and toxicity studies of nanomedicine used to treat pancreatic cancer in mice and dogs, but Li is hopeful to move into human clinical trials soon.

The company is also targeting other hard-to-treat cancers, such as bile duct, lung and breast cancer.

Duo Oncology strives to develop a pipeline that addresses the greatest unmet needs in cancer treatment. Li's work is part of that effort.

"The University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy is at the forefront of transforming health through research in drug discovery, development, translation, implementation and outcomes research," says Dean of the School of Pharmacy Amy L. Seybert.

"A perfect example of our impact is Dr. Li's groundbreaking research discoveries in novel delivery systems, such as in ultrasmall nanocarriers, which are paving the way for more effective cancer treatments," she continues.

Li has set the stage for young researchers like Chen. He provides mentorship and a collaborative environment in which they are encouraged and supported to make new discoveries on their own.

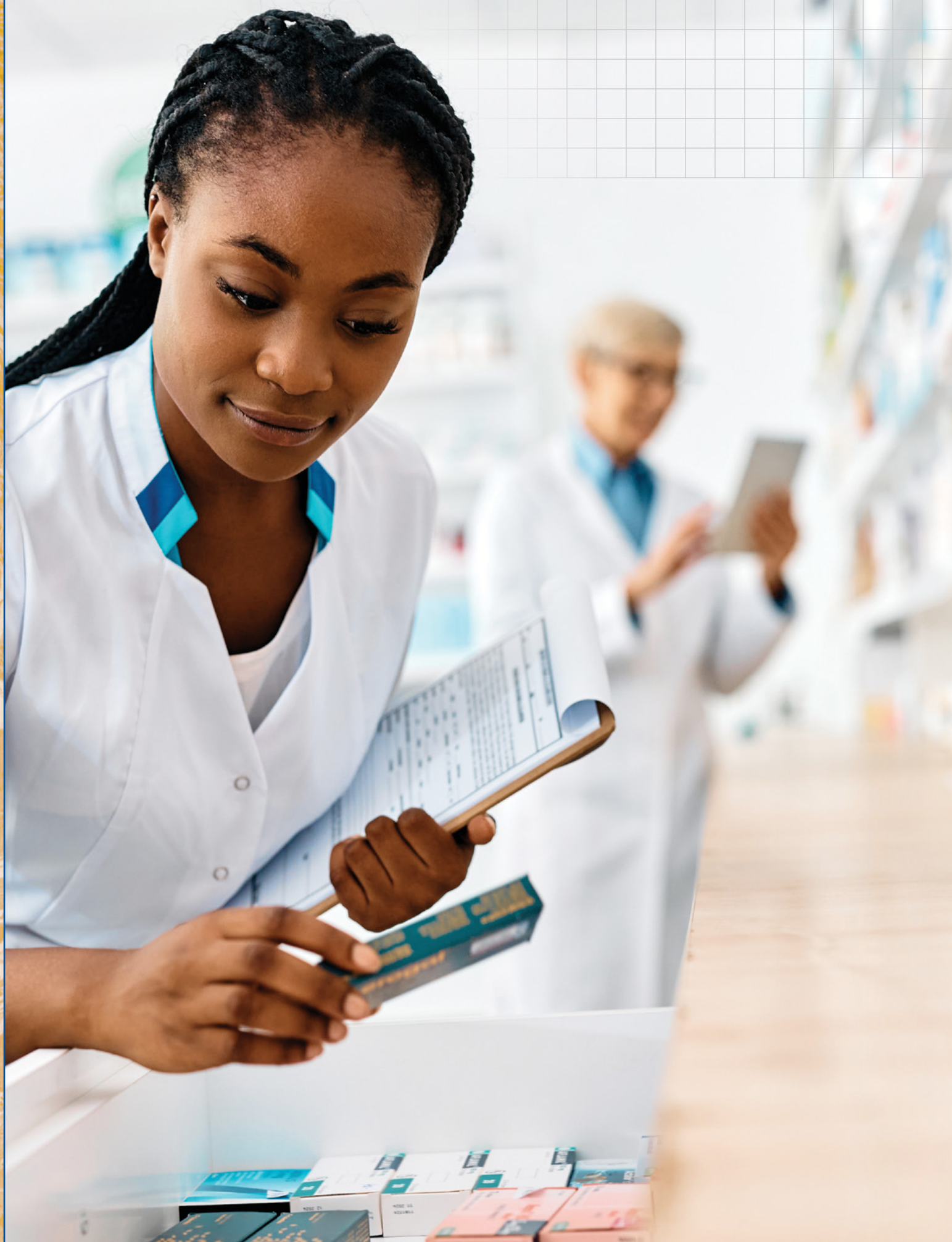
"Being a researcher is fascinating," says Chen. "It starts with a passion for a field and grows into truly understanding it. It is satisfying to see results reveal something new, whether they confirm our hypothesis or take an unexpected turn. Each finding brings a sense of uncovering the unknown."

She continues, "Seeing how research benefits people is truly inspiring." ■



“Being a researcher is fascinating. It starts with a passion for a field and grows into truly understanding it. It is satisfying to see results reveal something new, whether they confirm our hypothesis or take an unexpected turn. Each finding brings a sense of uncovering the unknown.”

—Chien-Yu Chen



FROM EXPERIENCE

How does the top-ranked University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy prepare its graduates for impactful, fulfilling careers? Outstanding faculty, expert preceptors, exceptional facilities and a dynamic curriculum that helps channel foundational skills into life-changing care.

Written by Dan Ayers



Cole Stevens

NERVOUS BUT READY

In fall 2024, Cole Stevens, a Chester County, Pennsylvania, native, was just months away from earning a Doctor of Pharmacy following three years of rigorous study and work at the University of Pittsburgh. He wasn't ready to celebrate yet, however. First, Stevens needed to secure his next career move: a coveted and highly competitive place in a top-tier postgraduate fellowship program.

"The process was very challenging because there are roughly a hundred applicants for every open position," recalls Stevens (PHARM '25). "You have to get really good at networking, showcasing your talents, and confidently presenting yourself. The process was very taxing, but the whole time I knew I was ready to take my next step."

And he was—in more ways than one.

As a doctoral student in Pitt's School of Pharmacy, where experiential learning is a core curriculum component, Stevens was being prepared to take on a vast array of challenges.

In addition to his classroom and lab curriculum, he had already spent many hours working with a diverse range of patients and pharmaceutical practices in

community and institutional health care settings. His fourth and final year was dedicated to experiential learning in the form of field-based learning rotations.

Through these opportunities, he built upon his skills, honed his interests, made professional contacts and gained real-world experience that helped him stand out in the market and on the job.

Ultimately, Stevens was awarded a prestigious two-year U.S. Medical Information and Medical Affairs Fellowship with Incyte, a global biopharmaceutical company. There, he serves as a scientific resource, delivering accurate, evidence-based information to health care professionals and internal stakeholders. He supports medical content development, collaborates on research and real-world evidence initiatives, and contributes to cross-functional projects that advance therapeutic area strategies and patient care.

"The rotations that I did as a student pharmacist were invaluable to helping me feel prepared," he says.

"I had so much more confidence because I had real experience in the field to draw from. And the network I built definitely helped me open some doors," he adds.



Susan Skledar



Rebecca Kendsersky

GROWTH EXPERIENCES

"We are very passionate about experiential learning because we've seen the difference that it makes in our students," says Susan Skledar, director of experiential learning and continuing professional development at Pitt Pharmacy.

Skledar knows well how on-the-job learning and training alongside skilled preceptors can help transform students into professionals ready to make a difference on the first day of their career. That is why the Experiential Learning Program comprises approximately one-third of the pharmacy curriculum and is a critical piece of Doctor of Pharmacy accreditation.

At Pitt Pharmacy, experiential learning activities begin within the first weeks of a student's first year.

Over the four years of the PharmD program, while also building their scientific knowledge on campus, students engage in a progressive set of practice-based experiences.

"We want to prepare students to provide patient-centered pharmaceutical care and be practice ready and team ready upon graduation," says Skledar.

It's all meant to best prepare graduates to thrive within a profession in transition. Pharmacists have emerged as frontline health care providers and integral members of complex, interdisciplinary medical teams. Experts predict that these roles will only grow over the coming years as an aging population meets a decline in primary care physicians, creating a gap in care that well-trained pharmacists will be poised to fill.

Pitt Pharmacy students are already taking on the challenge.

LEARNING AND DOING

When it came time to decide upon a career, Rebecca Kendsersky had no problem making up her mind. Her mother and brother both graduated from Pitt Pharmacy in 1979 and 2012, respectively. She had been drawn to the work for most of her life and was familiar with the profession. Yet, after her admission to Pitt Pharmacy, Kendsersky (PHARM '18) realized that she didn't know what specialty she wanted to pursue.

"One of the great things about the Experiential Learning Program is that you get an incredible amount of exposure to the places you can go with a PharmD," she says.

The first year of the program is intended to develop students' core practice skills. That includes enhancing social awarenesses and understanding social determinants of health within a community, encouraging public health through wellness and disease prevention programs, and developing



communication skills with patients from diverse populations. Following this, second-year students focus on community pharmacy practice, which involves learning medication dispensing processes for patient safety and developing patient education and counseling skills.

Kendsersky built on that training and more in one of her final-year experiential learning rotations, which took her to a Native American reservation in New Mexico, 1,500 miles away from Pittsburgh.

"We lived on the reservation for five weeks, counseling patients just like how pharmacists do everywhere else," she recalls. "But the resources were very scarce. That challenge created some unique situations that we worked through as a team."

The experience gave her a fresh perspective as well as enhanced technical skills. She learned to meet patients where they are, and to collaborate not just with colleagues but also with patients to achieve the best outcomes.

In Pitt's program, students are expected to take these kinds of new understandings into a hospital or health-system setting, which is just what Kendsersky did in her rotation at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. The results surprised her.

"I'll be honest. Working with children was not on my radar at all," she says. "But when I realized that every medication I touched was helping a child get out of the hospital, then I knew this is where I was meant to be."

"Even if I was just dosing some Tylenol, I knew I was helping a child get back to their Halloween, get back to their prom, or just get back to their home."

She also learned more about how much she loved working beside colleagues across specialties. Collaborating with nurses, dietitians, parents and even the patients themselves, Kendsersky was able to make a difference beyond medical interventions, even if that just meant approaching every challenge with a smile.

"We worked to make sure every aspect of their stay in the hospital was as much fun as possible."

Ultimately, Kendsersky's experiential learning led to her professional passion. After graduation, she earned postgraduate placements in pediatrics, including two years at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. Since 2020, she has served as a clinical pharmacist specializing in acute care with a focus in pulmonology and nephrology at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. She now is part of Pitt Pharmacy's expert team of preceptors for student learning.

"Even if I was just dosing some Tylenol, I knew I was helping a child get back to their Halloween, get back to their prom, or just get back to their home."

—Rebecca Kendsersky



Christian Rosikiewicz



THE PLACES YOU'LL GO

"Our graduates are making an impact well beyond what is commonly thought of as a pharmacist," says Skledar. "Beyond their vital role in direct patient care, they're contributing to research, international health, government policy, academia and more. We're very proud of the impact our graduates make in a wide range of career paths."

The Experiential Learning Program aids in this professional career diversity. The fourth-year focus on advanced pharmacy practice experiences can be tailored to each student's career goals.

The whole year is dedicated to intensive practice of the pharmaceutical care process in patients with increasingly complex pharmacotherapeutic problems. This is also the year where students can select elective rotations in areas of leadership, business, industry, academia, global health and more.

Fourth-year PharmD candidates complete eight five-week rotations spanning from April to May of the next year.

"I was very passionate about working in the university environment, teaching but also working with patients," says Christian Rosikiewicz (PHARM '21). "The University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy allowed me to steer my educational experience toward those passions. That helped me land a role that I love."

Today, Rosikiewicz is a clinical manager at the Pitt Vaccination and Health Connection Hub, where he connects members of the University community and the general public to clinical services and health-maintenance resources. He says his rotations—like the one he did with Bienestar Pharmacy and Wellness Center in Lindenwold, New Jersey—were not only key to preparing him for the work but also to connecting him with professionals already thriving in the field. For example, he completed an elective practice development rotation with Joni Carroll, assistant professor of pharmacy and therapeutics at Pitt Pharmacy and lead pharmacist with the Allegheny County Health Department. The rotation focused on providing enhanced services to patients on a large scale—work Rosikiewicz now does daily.

"My rotations helped me build my network, create connections, and ultimately get my foot into more doors," agrees Cole Stevens.

It helps, too, that Pitt Pharmacy partners with more than over 800 preceptors in the state, nationally and internationally to provide required and elective experiences. Through their dedicated efforts, preceptors play a vital role in preparing Pitt's future pharmacists to become successful practitioners. They are valued colleagues after graduation and are foundational to Pitt Pharmacy's robust alumni network.

Preceptors are also key to providing Pitt Pharmacy PharmD candidates with opportunities to continue building their knowledge and skills in a working environment—something that becomes more important each year.

To be ready for the future, Pitt Pharmacy students are learning to apply today's technology to tomorrow's breakthroughs. Automation can streamline tasks like insurance verification and verifying product selection, freeing pharmacists to spend more time with patients.



Telepharmacy can connect rural communities with expert care. Advanced data analytics is transforming everything from pharmaceutical research to inventory management. With help from the Experiential Learning Program, graduates are joining the workforce with increased familiarity with cutting-edge technology.

During one of his rotations, Stevens worked with a preceptor at a regional health care system to leverage data sets on a macro scale to elevate patient outcomes.

His team was able to optimize the prescription regimen for specific subsets of patients based on their condition, height, weight and age, among other factors.

"There's something pure about working with a patient one-on-one, but it's wild to think that your work will improve the lives of thousands of patients," says Stevens. "It was incredibly gratifying to apply the things I learned in the program on such a large scale."

FROM CLASSROOM TO CLINIC AND BEYOND

Watching a Pitt Pharmacy education translate into real-world impact is what it's all about for Skledar and her team in the Experiential Learning Program. Happily, it's something they get to see all the time.

No wonder the program is a critical component of what makes Pitt Pharmacy a nationally ranked, top-tier school. With its emphasis on ensuring that graduates are both practice ready and team ready, the school is helping to produce not only collaborative, patient-focused pharmacists ready to make a difference but also those who feel good doing it.

"I was very confident on day one," says Rosikiewicz in reflection of his first moves after graduating from Pitt.

"I felt very prepared to help people. To make sound decisions, to perform the job function, and also to just connect with real patients and help them. After all," he adds, "that's why we all got into this field in the first place." ■

"I felt very prepared to help people. To make sound decisions, to perform the job function, and also to just connect with real patients and help them. After all," he adds, "that's why we all got into this field in the first place."

—Christian Rosikiewicz

ON TRACK

When someone thinks of a pharmacist, the first image that often comes to mind is the friendly face behind the counter at the pharmacy—the person who answers questions about medications, fills prescriptions, double-checks for drug interactions and ensures efficacy and safety of drug therapy.

"That role is critically important and one that our graduates are trained to excel at," says Colleen M. Culley, PharmD, the director of doctor of pharmacy admissions for Pitt Pharmacy. "But it is far from the only thing a pharmacist can do. Earning a PharmD from the top-ranked University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy can open doors for you and take your career to extraordinary places."

Just ask Pitt Pharmacy alumni and faculty.

WITH A PITT PHARMD YOU CAN ...



CONDUCT TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

Aaron Devanathan (PHARM '16), assistant professor of pharmacy and therapeutics, University of Pittsburgh

"My research tracks drug concentrations of antiretrovirals in the body over time. We use a facility within Pitt's School of Pharmacy to quantify the amount of drug in different areas in the body. By doing so, we can perform pharmacokinetic modeling, which helps us track the efficacy of long-acting antiretrovirals administered as a bi-monthly or biannual injection, versus a daily pill. This data optimizes the way we treat and prevent HIV infections and increases the quality of life for patients."



MAKE A BIG IMPACT WITH BIG DATA

Juan M. Hincapie-Castillo, visiting associate professor of pharmacy and therapeutics, University of Pittsburgh

"My work at the intersection of pharmacoepidemiology, legal epidemiology and public health has benefited tremendously from my clinical background as a PharmD. The work I do in analyzing big data to inform best practices for pain management and implementation of pharmaceutical policies has a direct impact on the health of people with lived experience. I strongly believe that research translation does not only occur from bench to bedside, but it also must flow from big data into real-world policy."



SUPPORT CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Rebecca Kendzersky (PHARM '18), clinical pharmacy specialist, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

"I work directly with patients and parents. I also collaborate with their nurses, clinicians, dietitians and the whole multidisciplinary team to make sure that every prescription is dosed appropriately for the patient's age and weight. Many of the patients I see are having issues with their kidneys. They may either need a transplant or have just received one, so I must adjust medications based on the strength and health of their specific organs too. I love my job. Every prescription I touch is helping a kid get healthy and live a better life."



INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION OF PHARMACISTS

Christian Rosikiewicz (PHARM '21), clinical manager, Pitt Vaccination and Health Connection Hub at the University of Pittsburgh

"Pitt Pharmacy helped me identify what I really love: the personal connections I make at a community pharmacy and working in a university environment. I found a role where I can seamlessly combine those two things as a leader and preceptor for pharmacy students. The clinic I manage administers vaccines for things like flu and Covid, and we also administer vaccines needed so that students can study abroad and see the world."



SHAPE PUBLIC POLICY

Kristen Miller (PHARM '02), health science policy analyst, United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

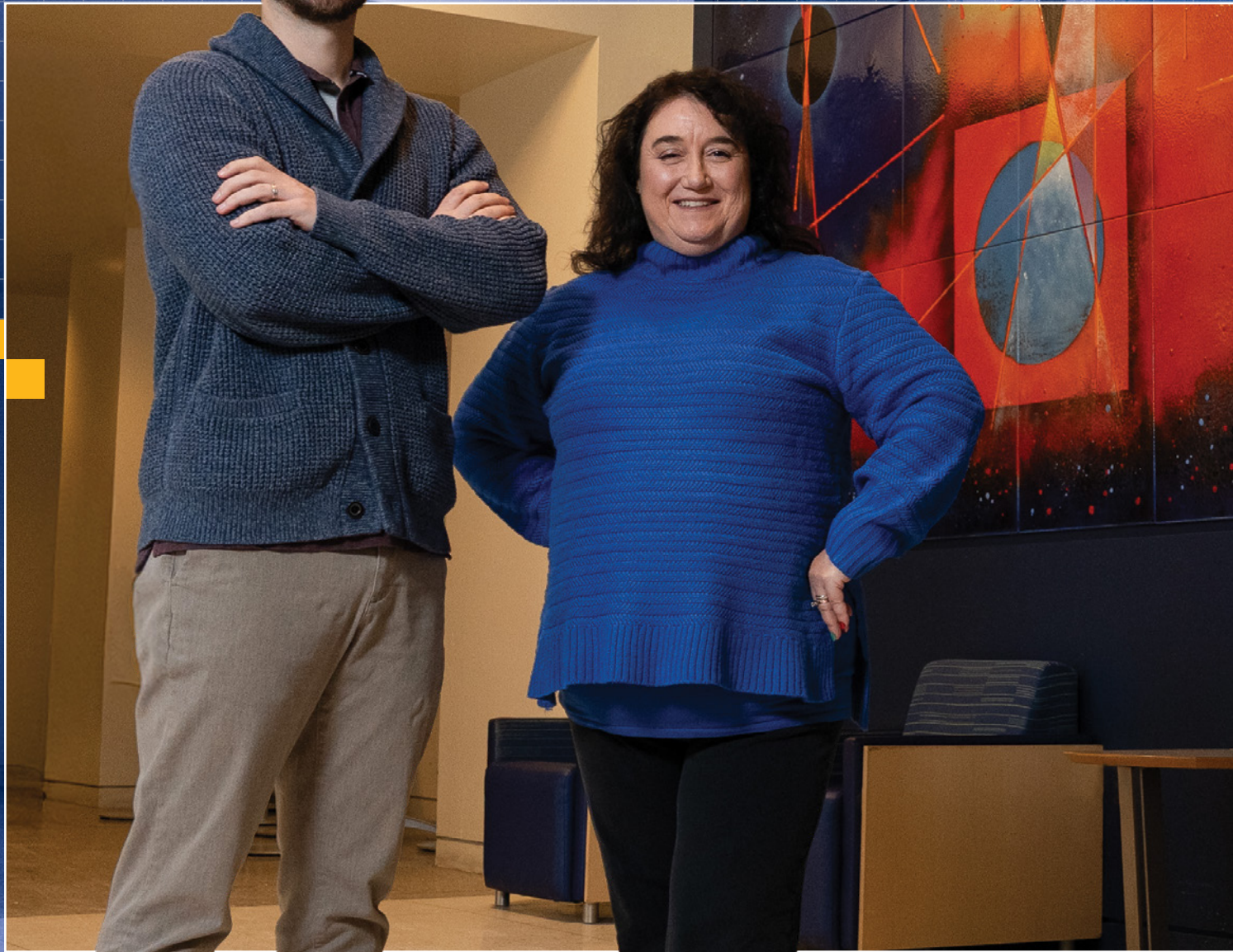
"I've been fortunate to experience several of the many roles pharmacists can play at the FDA. I've helped determine whether new drug products should be approved, served as a bridge between scientific and legal experts, built partnerships across the clinical trial community, and guided the real-world evidence program at the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research."



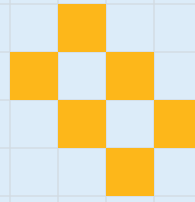
MANAGE PAIN SAFELY

Isabelle Zervas (PHARM '22), pain management clinical pharmacy specialist in Ann Arbor, Michigan

"Experiential learning at Pitt helped me see all the places you can go with a PharmD, and it helped me find the part of pharmacy that I absolutely love: working directly with patients. Today I see patients who struggle with chronic and complex pain. By understanding their story and medication history, I make recommendations to their hospital team that can be translated to a safe and sustainable outpatient plan. Much of my work addresses unnecessary opioid prescribing and emphasizes harm reduction."



Lucas Hill and Debra Moore



COMMUNITY SERVICE *and Support*

BUILDING ON A LEGACY OF MULTIFACETED, DATA-DRIVEN RESEARCH AND INITIATIVES, PITT PHARMACY'S IMPLEMENTATION AND RESEARCH CENTER FOR HEALTHY COMMUNITIES IS HELPING TO CREATE A HEALTHIER FUTURE FOR THOSE IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA AND BEYOND.

Written by Lindy Kravec

"Whether we're brainstorming with one group on how to address the latest challenge, helping another write a grant, or explaining ways to collect data and track changes that occur in people and populations, I like to think we're building capacity in communities and making a difference in the lives of many individuals."

—Debra Moore

David was struggling to achieve recovery from opioid use disorder (OUD).

His road was long, difficult and complicated. For years, he had been trying unsuccessfully to stop using illegal opioids on his own by participating in conventional inpatient and outpatient treatment programs.

Unfortunately, his is a familiar story.

In 2023, 8.9 million people in the United States age 12 or older engaged in illicit use of opioids and 5.7 million met the diagnostic criteria for OUD. In that same year, 81,953 Americans died of an opioid-related overdose. Meanwhile, only 18% of people with OUD received evidence-based medication treatment, and many of those received treatment that failed to address their individual needs.

Now recognized as a national public health crisis, the modern rise in opioid-related overdoses began in the 2000s because of the overprescription of drugs for pain relief and management. While opioid prescriptions have decreased dramatically over the last two decades, this shift has been associated with a rise in the prevalence of potent synthetic opioids like fentanyl, which have created new challenges and accelerated the ongoing problem.

People like David (not his real name) strive for a future without opioids. Throughout his addiction, he sought to receive and stick to treatment, but providers consistently failed to address his specific needs for trauma-informed care and support in finding housing and employment. David wanted to stay in treatment, repair relationships with his children and stabilize his daily life. But he was in dire need of a team who could build a care plan around his priorities.

Enter the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy.

Its Program Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU), which started in 2006, has an extensive history of collaborating with communities to develop solutions and help organizations accomplish their goals to address the needs of individuals with substance use and a variety of related issues, specifically behavioral health disorders and suicide prevention.

Today, with a new leadership team, updated name, a commitment to a revised mission and vision, and updated values, the Implementation and Research Center for Healthy Communities (IRC) promises to deliver improved health and well-being through innovative health services research, robust curriculum development and evaluation, and the application of implementation science principles to advance evidence-based practices in health care and community settings.

AGENTS OF CHANGE

"IRC is unique among pharmacy schools," says Lucas Hill, IRC's director. "Its work bridges a wide spectrum of topics in the fields of clinical practice, implementation research and public health policy. Through the delivery of diverse programs, we have a variety of ways to support individuals who use substances."

Over the past 20 years, operating as PERU, the center has tackled a broad range of community health challenges and has built solid partnerships with key federal, state and county agencies, as well as health care organizations and providers.

"Few other programs have the breadth and scope to be real agents of change," Hill adds.

As an associate professor of pharmacy and therapeutics in the School of Pharmacy, Hill is an educator and researcher. He leads a multidisciplinary team of more than 30 professionals with expertise in health services research, implementation science, data analysis and professional education.

Debra Moore is a research associate professor in the School of Pharmacy and the IRC senior director of research and evaluation. She uses her expertise to help communities implement evidence-based programming to affect positive, systemic change.

Moore notes that IRC's work currently spans 47 counties in Pennsylvania and four in eastern Ohio. Its partners range from health care professionals to managed care organizations, first responders, criminal

justice systems, universities and veterans.

"No two days are ever the same," says Moore. "Whether we're brainstorming with one group on how to address the latest challenge, helping another write a grant, or explaining ways to collect data and track changes that occur in people and populations, I like to think we're building capacity in communities and making a difference in the lives of many individuals."

TRAINING HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Over the years, PERU played a pivotal role in building innovative curricula and educating thousands of health care professionals across the nation in evidence-based practices. That work continues under the umbrella of the Implementation and Research Center for Healthy Communities.

Senior Training Coordinator Martha Landolina has been part of the team for more than seven years.

"IRC's training initiatives equip health care professionals and community partners with knowledge and skills they need to deliver safer, more effective and compassionate care," says Landolina. "By developing evidence-based curricula, we help strengthen clinical practices, enhance provider confidence, and ultimately improve patient outcomes across diverse care settings."

The Pennsylvania Department of Health contracted with IRC to develop curricula for prescribers based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's)

2022 guidelines for prescribing opioids. IRC conducted a needs assessment survey to determine the perception of educational need among those who prescribe controlled substances and identify any gaps in the existing curricula, additional research and literature reviews. As a result, IRC was able to develop curricula to improve the effectiveness and safety of pain treatment, mitigate pain, improve function and quality of life for patients with pain, and reduce risks associated with opioid pain therapy, including OUD, fatal and nonfatal overdose and death.

The University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine recently collaborated with IRC to develop and permanently integrate curricula on screening patients for substance use impacts and treating patients for OUD. As a result of this collaboration, future physicians are prepared to prescribe evidence-based medications and provide support services to individuals with substance use disorders.

Pitt's Schools of Pharmacy, of Social Work, and of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences also worked with IRC to address substance use disorder prevention, identification and connection to treatment, preparing even more health care professionals to focus on this critical public health need.

More than 10 years ago, IRC began to share its research knowledge with the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy at St. Joseph's University. Emeritus Dean George E. Downs credits IRC with initiating his college's research association with the



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that strives to advance the behavioral health of the nation.

"The Pitt team developed strong relationships with our young faculty researchers, allowing our efforts to progress rapidly," says Downs. "Under their guidance, we were able to establish multiple campus and regional interdisciplinary programs that introduced students in different fields to their role as future health care professionals in addressing patients with substance use disorder.

"Their experience with practical-level research was invaluable in guiding us," he continues. "We have been pleased and grateful for our relationship with them."

EVIDENCE-BASED, DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES

Thanks to IRC, clinicians involved with the center have access to evidence-based practices that can reduce OUD and substance-related harms.

IRC has led several projects to implement Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) in various clinical settings. As a five-year initiative with select primary care sites, it has integrated this workflow into electronic health records, which resulted in more than 20,000 patients screened for unhealthy substance use. Because of this practice, future patients can be assured of continuous clinical care coordination and process improvement.

IRC has since partnered with colleges and universities in Pennsylvania to establish SBIRT clinical workflow protocols at student health centers. Students identified as at risk of substance use health impacts are provided with critical resources, including naloxone and overdose prevention education and referred to specialized treatment when appropriate.

Velva Greene-Rainey, director of health services at Lincoln University, says collaboration with Pitt Pharmacy has been valuable on many levels.

"They have become the bridge to making our data collection reflect our daily work, highlighting the progress we've made in serving our student population," she says. "And the training support they've given has allowed us to freely share information with our campus partners."

HONORING VETERANS' SERVICE BY SUPPORTING THEIR FUTURES

Active-duty service members lay their lives on the line every day. But when they return home, they face another potential danger: a higher-than-average risk of suicide.

There were 6,407 veteran suicide deaths in 2022, according to the 2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. It is the second-leading cause of death for veterans under the age of 45.

Since 2020, IRC has been partnering with federal, state and local veterans organizations to reach individuals who may be at risk. The Northwest Pennsylvania Veteran Suicide Prevention program—an IRC initiative—aims to reduce veteran suicides in 15 northwestern Pennsylvania counties by 10% over a five-year period. With funding from the CDC as part of their comprehensive suicide prevention program, the team advocates for annual mental health screenings and builds trust between veterans and health care providers.

"We're training the gatekeepers—health care providers—on how to have conversations with veterans who may be in crisis," explains Debra Moore, IRC's senior director of research and evaluation. "Once relationships are established, there is hope that risky behaviors will be reduced and the number of suicide deaths will decrease."

One of the most effective programs revolves around gun safety. Members of the IRC team facilitate community conversations with health care providers and gun shop owners. They advise health care providers on how to set up gun safety plans with their patients and facilitate the distribution of gun locks at local events.

IRC also offers technical assistance to help veterans organizations set up networking events. Fishing on Lake Erie and "forest bathing" in the wilderness have provided calming experiences and opportunities for veterans to improve their mental health and well-being.

"By connecting veterans to their community and to each other," says Moore, "we are saving lives."





Greene-Rainey notes, “It also keeps us updated on any new case scenarios. Pitt Pharmacy has assisted us with making necessary changes to our reporting verbiage to align with executive orders, while maintaining the fidelity of the campus ethos as we use SBIRT to support our students.”

IRC’s offerings are particularly valuable in rural areas where individuals may not have easy access to health services and interventions and where small health care providers may not have the extensive support they need to help all patients.

In rural Pennsylvania’s Greene and Washington counties, for example, IRC has implemented SBIRT in two UPMC Washington Hospital emergency rooms, permitting universal screening of at-risk patients, brief interventions, and warm handoff referrals to further assessment and treatment.

In addition, IRC supports the hospitals with technical assistance, including data-informed continuous quality improvement and evaluation activities to ensure ongoing fidelity of medical records.

BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

“Our experience in implementing community-based and health care systemwide interventions provides our teams with a deep understanding of the obstacles and challenges that partners encounter,” says Hill.

“The best way to address these challenges is by supporting the unique needs of various communities.”

IRC now offers technical assistance to more than 200 Centers of Excellence (COEs) for OUD treatment through special funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services.

Specifically, the IRC team manages and maintains data collection for more than 100,000 patients, prepares reports for the COEs to support data-driven decision-making, and evaluates program outcomes. These efforts all relate to improving the quality of care for clients with OUD and increasing patient enrollment and retention in treatment.

In many cases, individuals with substance use disorder require wraparound services that coordinate care among physical health, behavioral health and social services.

Mandy Fauble, vice president of operations at UPMC Behavioral Health, says her connection with Pitt Pharmacy’s IRC team aided her work in the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention program.

“Their efforts to facilitate the health of rural Pennsylvanians are impressive,” says Fauble. “From reducing suicide and overdose deaths to improving social networks and data tracking, the team builds local skills and infrastructure to serve the communities and improve sustainability.”

FINANCING THE WAY FORWARD

The positive impact of patient-centered practices is obvious as programs grow and more communities and health care providers embrace the work of IRC. But the center’s success—and the successes of its many collaborators—would not be possible without funding from key partners.

IRC is currently managing more than \$19 million in project funding from federal sources such as SAMHSA, CDC and the HRSA, as well as the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, private foundations and managed care organizations.



"Our diverse collection of funders and collaborators has enabled IRC to navigate a challenging funding environment while providing critical research and implementation support to advance community health," says Hill.

"Our partners have empowered us to lead overdose prevention efforts across urban and rural communities and facilitated our foundational efforts in suicide prevention," he continues. "We are grateful for their support and eager to continue to work with them moving forward as we strive to improve the health of communities in our region and beyond."

That includes the health and well-being of people like David, who continues his recovery journey. Through IRC's support of the OUD Center of Excellence where David obtained treatment, he was connected to personalized recovery supports that focus on his family, housing and employment needs.

He is just one of thousands whose path forward has been made brighter and more accessible by IRC and Pitt's School of Pharmacy. ■



ON THE FRONT LINE OF CARE

First responders are often the first—and only—source of treatment for individuals experiencing opioid overdose. With funding from the Hillman Foundation, the Pennsylvania Department of Health and SAMHSA, IRC trainers have instructed more than 5,000 emergency medical services (EMS) personnel and firefighters across Pennsylvania and Ohio via the Strategies to Coordinate Overdose Prevention through Emergency Medical Services (SCOPE) program.

This unique training, which provides continuing education credit for EMS workers, empowers first responders to reduce the impact of opioid overdoses. It dispels harmful myths about the safe handling of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids and facilitates compassionate overdose response through naloxone administration and referral to recovery-oriented systems of care to prevent avoidable overdose deaths.

After a recent session, one SCOPE trainee responded to an anonymous survey, writing, "The training explained the disease of substance use in more depth than I have ever experienced. I also learned how to administer naloxone and ways to talk to and deal with a person who has a substance use problem."

GLOBAL IMPACT

REDEFINING "ACCESS TO CARE"

Written by Lindy Kravec



A 40-year-old mother of three walks for nearly two hours to reach a clinic in the rural village of San Jose del Negrito, Honduras. She has been diagnosed with diabetes but has difficulty managing the disease. Her diet consists mainly of foods that can cause a rise in blood sugar levels, such as fried plantain, tortillas and rice. She has a limited knowledge of the dangers of diabetes, no access to certain medications and no way of monitoring her condition on a regular basis.

She is not alone.



Martha Ndung'u



Alexandria Taylor

"I gained a true appreciation of the value of 'access to care' when we walked three miles up a mountain through rough terrain for a home visit with an 80-year-old woman with Parkinson's disease."

—Alexandria Taylor

The incidence of diabetes in Honduras has doubled in the last 25 years, according to a World Health Organization study that found more than 1,720 deaths in 2024 related to diabetes and high blood glucose in that country.

Martha Ndung'u, assistant professor of pharmacy and therapeutics in the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy, is passionate about changing that statistic. She works diligently to understand the cultural and social factors that influence diabetes management in Honduras and other underserved areas of the world.

Ndung'u visited the clinic in San Jose del Negrito, Honduras, in March 2025 through the privately funded nonprofit organization Shoulder-to-Shoulder Pittsburgh-San Jose. Over a two-week period, she and a multidisciplinary team of doctors, nurses and physician assistants collaborated with local health care providers, sharing evidence-based practices in diabetes care and providing much-needed education, medicine and monitoring supplies. She also visited schools to teach local students about the importance of healthy lifestyle choices.

Throughout her visit, she was reminded of the importance of listening to the local people and trying to understand their unique challenges and needs.

For example, Ndung'u encountered Hondurans who reported using an herbal remedy, *Costus igneus* (known to some as the "insulin plant"), on a daily basis. She believes that while more scientific research is needed to better comprehend the efficacy of the plant, it's important to recognize the usage and perceived benefit of traditional herbal remedies.

"Respecting the culture is key to gaining trust," notes Ndung'u.

ON TRACK TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Back in Pittsburgh, Ndung'u offers Pitt Pharmacy students the opportunity to personalize their education, gain insight through hands-on experience, and develop new perspectives on approaching underserved care. She does it through a unique academic track—one that she herself pursued: the Area of Concentration-Global Health (ARCO-GH).

ARCO-GH students follow the standard PharmD curriculum and then choose six elective credits that can range from women's health or smoking cessation in underserved settings to principles of global health informatics. They must complete two advanced pharmacy practice experiences in the area of global health, either in the United States or abroad, as well as a special project that has global health implications or a focus on health disparities and health equity.

As part of this work, every year, approximately 10 Pitt ARCO-GH students join health care providers and other students from the University of Pittsburgh and other institutions in a medical brigade sponsored by Shoulder-to-Shoulder. They work directly with patients in the clinic in San Jose del Negrito, collecting data about medication access and assessing inventory management at the clinic.

Miranda Steinkopf (PHARM '19), director of transformation and community building at the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, was one of those students.

"My experience in Honduras was nothing short of life-changing," she says. "My major takeaway was the importance of intentional collaborative leadership with the local community when providing any type of service.

"Creating a collaboration in which the community has ownership and power in the situation is critical to building lasting and meaningful positive impact," Steinkopf continues. "This is something I've taken with me in all aspects of my work ever since."

Alexandria Taylor (PHARM '20) agrees. She says her experiences abroad shaped the way she practices here in Pittsburgh. "I am more empathetic about what it's like to navigate another country's health system and the additional challenges that people face when they do not speak the native language.

"Furthermore, I gained a true appreciation of the value of 'access to care' when we walked three miles up a mountain through rough terrain for a home visit with an 80-year-old woman with Parkinson's disease."

Today, as a senior clinical pharmacist at UPMC St. Margaret in Pittsburgh and the director for global health within the UPMC St. Margaret Family Medicine Residency Program, Taylor continues her involvement with the Shoulder-to-Shoulder Pittsburgh-San Jose program. She coordinates pharmacy learners for the medical brigades and manages the procurement of medications for the clinic's in-house dispensary.

Taylor says her time in the ARCO-GH program taught her how to collaborate effectively, build capacity and foster mutually beneficial partnerships—skills that help pharmacists tend to all medically underserved individuals, not just those in low-resourced countries.



Sharon Connor



SERVING THE UNDERSERVED

The definition of “medically underserved” is evolving. While areas with too few primary care providers, high infant mortality rates, high poverty and high elderly populations are still cited by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) as “medically underserved,” there is an increased awareness of other vulnerable populations, especially those in urban areas. Many experts have added the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants, incarcerated persons, persons with disabilities and others who are at risk due to their social or economic situation.

Sharon E. Connor, associate professor of pharmacy and therapeutics, embraces this concept.

She brings her extensive knowledge of serving in resource-limited settings such as the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Malawi, Kenya and Ethiopia to her role as the director of Pitt’s Grace Lamsam Pharmacy Program for Underserved Populations (GLPP), which provides services in the Pittsburgh area.

“Although the School of Pharmacy has always offered experiential rotations in places like Honduras, Namibia and Malawi, our global health concentration goes beyond overseas travel,” says Connor. “It is designed to give students the opportunity to better understand the challenges of serving patients in any low-resourced setting—whether it’s in a rural community in a developing nation or at a homeless shelter in our own backyard.”

Every year, GLPP engages volunteer pharmacists and approximately 200 pharmacy students and residents from Pitt and elsewhere to provide free medication to 3,000 patients at primary care clinics, homeless shelters and drop-in centers in Pittsburgh.

Working in an interdisciplinary model, they dispense more than 6,000 prescriptions valued at more than \$750,000 each year through partnerships with the Health Care for the Homeless Project, Program for Health Care to Underserved Populations, and the Second Avenue Commons Health Center.

“Watching students participate is really inspiring,” Connor says. “It shapes their practice and creates a cadre of pharmacists who are committed to addressing health disparities.”



Shoulder-to-Shoulder Clinic



ACCP GH PRN 2025 Emerging Global Health Leader Award winner Alexandria Taylor with Ndung'u

"These experiences provide students with skills to be empathetic, creative and culturally sensitive when trying to solve problems for people of all ages and in all circumstances—in all places," adds Ndung'u. "They also help them develop research that is focused on addressing the health needs of vulnerable populations wherever they may live."

When it comes to improving health care for someone like the Honduran woman with diabetes, Ndung'u says there is hope.

With continued support from faculty, students and organizations like Shoulder-to-Shoulder Pittsburgh-San Jose, she and others like her will soon have better access to medication, education and pharmacists who are truly invested in sustainable global health initiatives. ■

"Watching students participate is really inspiring," Connor says. "It shapes their practice and creates a cadre of pharmacists who are committed to addressing health disparities."



ALUMNI UPDATES

THE LATEST NEWS FROM
THE PITT PHARMACY
ALUMNI COMMUNITY



Frank Aceto (PHARM '90) visited the School of Pharmacy to speak to first-year students about nuclear pharmacy. His wife, Antoinette Aceto (PHARM '91), is also an alum. Their son, Anthony, is a current PhD student at the school.



Owned by **Scott Adamson** (PHARM '93), McCracken Pharmacy in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, was one of only 32 pharmacies nationwide to earn the 2025 Community Pharmacy Enhanced Services Network's Most Engaged Pharmacy. The inaugural honor was given by Pennsylvania Pharmacists Care Network Leadership. Other alumni affiliated with the McCracken Pharmacy include Robert Maher (PHARM '97), Stephanie McGrath (PHARM '07) and Kelsey Hake (PHARM '19).



Jovonne Williams (PHARM '09) has been selected as a volunteer expert for the United States Pharmacopeial Convention Healthcare Safety, Quality and Nomenclature Expert Committee for 2025-30. She is a clinical pharmacist consultant currently working at Optum on the Clinical Excellence Quality Performance STARS Pharmacy Part D Programs team.



Indrani Kar (PHARM '13) gave a presentation titled "A New Sphere of Influence: Formulary Strategies for Ultra-high-cost Drugs and Cell/Gene Therapies" at the ASHP Leaders conference. She is manager of formulary and drug policy at University Hospitals in Cleveland, Ohio.



Alicia Lichvar (PHARM '13) is a recipient of the 2025 American Society of Transplantation Distinguished Mid-Career Award. This award recognizes Lichvar's outstanding contributions to the kidney transplant field and transplantation at large. She is currently a clinical transplant pharmacist at University of California, Irvine.



There's a new addition to the Pitt Pharmacy family. Two alums, **Katlyn Grossman** (PHARM '16) and **Brian Terreri** (PHARM '17), just welcomed a baby girl in August.



Yue Wang (PHARM '18, '23) recently received the highly competitive NCI Pathway to Independence Award for Early-Stage Postdoctoral Researchers (K99/R00) for her work, "Systematically Investigate Anti-Cancer Drug's Modulation on T Cells in Tumor Microenvironment."



Michael Mast (PHARM '22) was recently named to the 2025 "Top 30 Under 30 Future Leaders of Charlotte" list for his work expanding health care access across North Carolina. He is the director of pharmacy for the Atrium Health Levine Cancer Institute. ■

SPREAD THE WORD

Changed jobs? New baby?
Recent publication?
We want to hear all about it!

Share your latest news—
professional and personal—
with the alumni community
via Pitt Pharmacy magazine at:
pharmacy.pitt.edu/news/request.

IN MEMORIAM

PHILLIP D. PULSINELLI 1943-2025

A celebrated educator. An accomplished scientist and researcher. A keen athlete and musician. A beloved husband, brother, father and grandfather. Throughout his life, Phillip D. Pulsinelli served many valued roles.

Pulsinelli, of Export, Pennsylvania, died on Oct. 15, 2025, at the age of 82. He is survived by his loving wife, daughter, son, grandsons and siblings.

"Phil defied generalities," says Patricia D. Kroboth, Distinguished Professor of Pharmacy and dean emerita of the University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy and a longtime friend and colleague of Pulsinelli. "He was an outstanding Pitt football player and professor of biochemistry. You don't often find those words in the same sentence."

He was a graduate of McKeesport High School and earned academic and athletic scholarships to Pitt.

"As a freshman, Phil scrimmaged against the great Mike Ditka," says Kroboth. "That experience helped him decide on studying at the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, England, with Nobel Laureate Max Perutz."

In 1973, Pulsinelli returned to Pitt as an assistant professor of medicinal chemistry and an adjunct assistant professor of crystallography. In Pittsburgh, he built an influential career as a researcher and respected member of the academic and scientific communities.

"His pioneering work yielded the first three-dimensional structure of the mutant protein responsible for causing polycythemia and related work on hemoglobin," says Kroboth. "Phil also brought his energy and enthusiasm to the classroom."

At the School of Pharmacy, he taught students from undergraduate through graduate and professional levels, including those in the Schools of Medicine and of Dental Medicine.



Phil Pulsinelli and Dean Emerita Pat Kroboth

"His courses were fresh every time, as he integrated abnormal physiology and disease consequences with the rigor of biochemistry," remembers Kroboth. "And he had heart."

That heart was apparent to his students as well as his colleagues. He was named Hygeia Teacher of the Year by the Class of 1982.

Pulsinelli served on many boards and panels throughout his career and participated in numerous international symposia and workshops. Even in retirement, he remained dedicated to science, pursuing studies in mathematical and theoretical physics.

His work—and his heart—will continue to be remembered at Pitt and beyond. ■

The following individuals have passed away as of Nov. 30, 2025.

Samuel Barfield (PHARM '50) • **Robert A. Cohn** (PHARM '65) • **Daniel J. Damratoski** (PHARM '68; DEN '72)

Patrick D. Dolan Sr. (PHARM '63) • **Anthony R. Geraci** (PHARM '58; MED '64) • **Margaret Ann Hrinia** (PHARM '66; BUS '92)

Robert Francis Kasisky (PHARM '92) • **Marvin H. Levick** (PHARM '55; MED '60) • **Sarah Ann L. Magnotti** (PHARM '53)

Dale D. Milks (PHARM '69) • **James Clair McMichael** (PHARM '74) • **Edward Donald Purich** (PHARM '63; PHARM '68; PHARM '73)

John P. Rosile (PHARM '57) • **John R. Rupprecht** (PHARM '57) • **Marion E. Sauers** (PHARM '74; PHARM '81)

Thomas Pearce Saxton (PHARM '66) • **Anne E. Daniels Severs** (PHARM '68) • **Roberta R. Wilson** (PHARM '79; LAW '83)

PROTIPS

MEMBERS OF PITT PHARMACY'S ALUMNI BOARD GIVE THEIR BEST PIECES OF ADVICE TO CURRENT AND GRADUATING PHARM D STUDENTS.

"Don't be afraid to share with others who you want to be and where you want to go. You'll be surprised by the doors that open when you least expect it!"

– Lucas Berenbrok (PHARM '13), associate professor of pharmacy and therapeutics and vice chair for education at Pitt Pharmacy

"Work the network, because the network works for you. Do not be afraid to reach out to others for help and maintain contact with those in your space of pharmacy. These actions will add to your success in the small world of pharmacy."

– Indrani Kar (PHARM '13), system pharmacy manager of formulary and drug policy at University Hospitals Health System in Cleveland, Ohio

Do you have words of wisdom to share?
Let us know your best pieces of advice for current students by emailing Associate Director of Alumni Relations Halle Angelo at halleangelo@pitt.edu.

"Stay curious and never stop learning. The pharmacy profession is constantly evolving, and your adaptability will be your greatest strength. Build relationships, seek mentorship, and remember that every patient interaction is an opportunity to make a difference."

– Jovonne Williams (PHARM '09), clinical pharmacist consultant currently working at Optum on the Clinical Excellence Quality Performance STARS Pharmacy Part D Programs team

"Your career as a pharmacist is a journey, not a sprint. Make the most of every opportunity! Best wishes Class of 2026!"

– Susan Skledar (PHARM '88), director of experiential learning and continuing professional development at Pitt Pharmacy

"As you transition from student to pharmacist, give yourself grace every day. Pitt Pharmacy has built a solid foundation for you, but there is still so much to learn. Become comfortable saying 'I don't know, but let me look into it.' Knowing and recognizing your limits will only strengthen your rapport with colleagues (and over time, you'll find you need to say this phrase less and less)!"

– Rebecca Kendersky (PHARM '18), clinical pharmacy specialist in pulmonology and nephrology at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

"A pharmacist's wisdom and reassurance can be the greatest source of healing and hope, providing comfort long before the remedy takes effect."

– Christine Ruby-Scelsi (PHARM '94), assistant professor of pharmacy and therapeutics at Pitt Pharmacy



THE DOGS OF PITT PHARMACY

School spirit is a family affair at Pitt Pharmacy, even for our four-legged friends!

From our faculty, staff and their spirited pups, thank you for being a part of our University family.

Dean Amy Seybert's
Cocoa



Nicole Kocon's
Blaze



Sandra Kane-Gill's
Ryder



Tom Nolin's
Tucker

