

ADRC *Moving Toward a Cure* PATHWAYS

FDA Grants Full Approval for New Drug for Early Stage Alzheimer's

By Tharick Pascoal, MD, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has granted full approval for Leqembi, the first drug shown to slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease (AD). Although other AD medications have been available for many years, they offer only symptom relief and cannot change the progression of the disease.

Leqembi does not cure or stop AD, but it has been shown to slow the worsening of AD symptoms by about 30% after 18 months of treatment. There has been debate about whether the slowing of AD progression by only six months outweighs the risk of the potentially serious side effects of Leqembi. In clinical trials, about 13% of patients who received Leqembi developed brain swelling, compared to 2% of those in the placebo group. Additionally, about 17% in the Leqembi group experienced brain bleeds, compared to 9% in the placebo group.

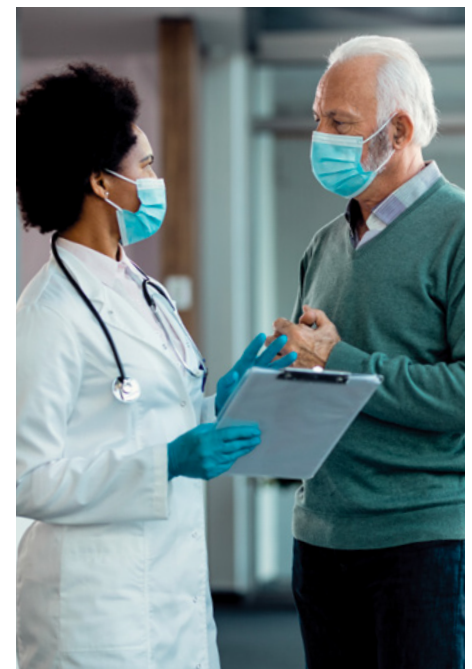
Leqembi may benefit some patients, but it is not right for every patient with AD. To be eligible for Leqembi, patients must be in the early stages of the disease, and side effects can be more severe depending on patients' characteristics and a patient's use of certain medications, such as blood thinners. As a result, it is important that patients discuss whether Leqembi

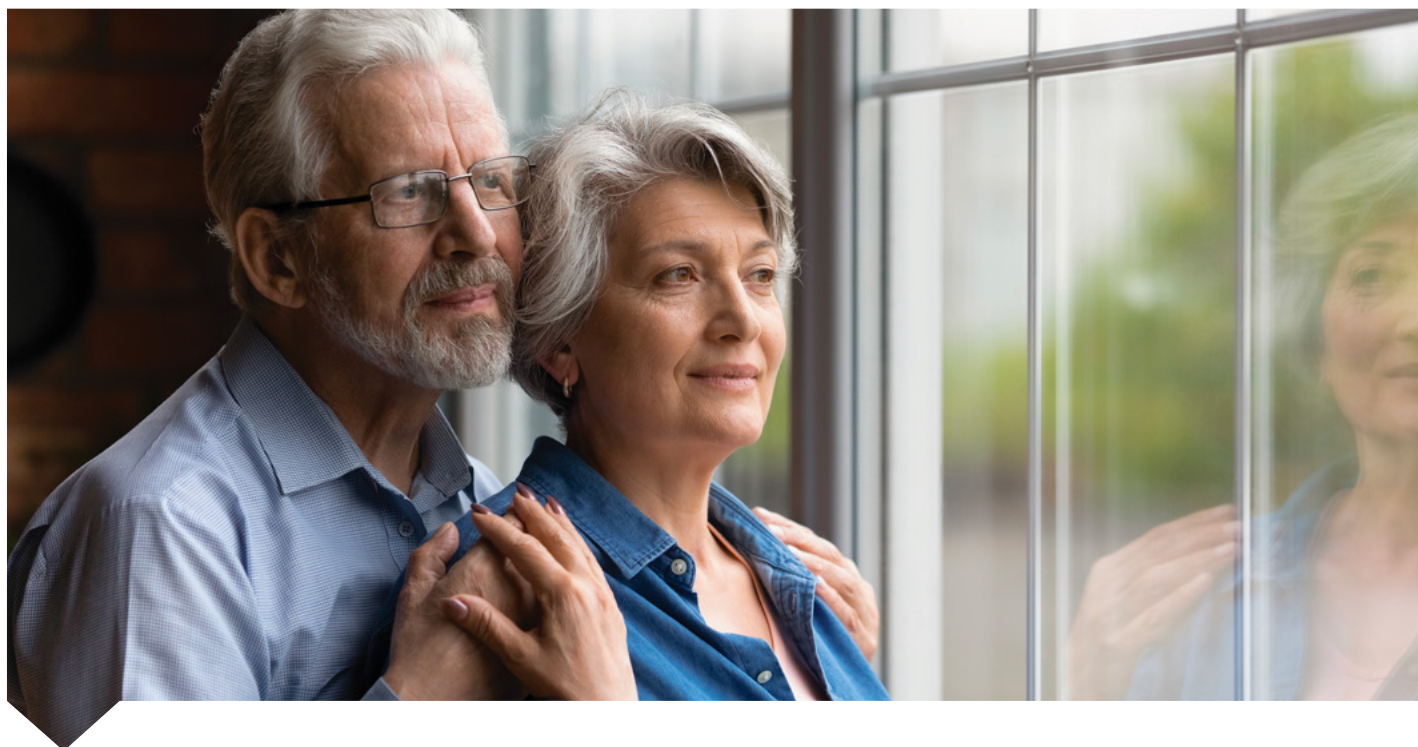
is right for them with their physician and, together with their family, weigh the potential risks and benefits of the treatment for them.

Another downside to Leqembi is that it is not a drug that patients can use at home, as it is administered through an hour-long intravenous infusion every other week. Additionally, the risks of brain swelling and bleeding from Leqembi treatment need to be monitored periodically via brain imaging.

Medicare has announced that it will cover Leqembi if a medical provider collects certain medical information about the patient and places it into a national database. This will help to provide more evidence for how Leqembi works in real-world settings, outside clinical trials, and over longer periods. This information also will help to inform how Leqembi should be used in the future. Medicare coverage will make the \$26,500-per-year drug more accessible, but the annual out-of-pocket copay may still be quite high, up to thousands of dollars. Soon, another drug with similar characteristics, called donanemab, is expected to join Leqembi and gain full FDA approval and Medicare coverage; however, it is unknown how the approval and coverage will change access and costs of this class of drugs.

In summary, Leqembi is a new therapeutic tool available to assist medical providers in treating people with early stage AD. The fact that the benefits and side effects of the drug can vary depending on a patient's health conditions and circumstances highlights that the decision to prescribe this medication needs to be carefully made by medical providers on a patient by patient basis. ■





Understanding POLST, Another Type of Advance Directive

By Jennifer B. Seamam, PhD, RN, CHPN

Many of us are familiar with documents like a living will or durable power of attorney for health care (DPOA-HC), the most common forms of advance directive. However, there is a newer form of advance directive, POLST. POLST stands for Pennsylvania Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment. Completing a living will or DPOA-HC is recommended for all adults. However, POLST has a more specific purpose: to help individuals with serious illness convey their wishes about end-of-life care.

A living will is an important tool to convey your values and preferences about your care if at any point you are ill and unable to speak for yourself. Likewise, a DPOA-HC lets health care providers know who you would like to make decisions for you if you cannot make them for yourself.

However, a living will cannot serve as “active orders,” and it cannot be acted upon directly by health care providers if you are admitted to a hospital or emergency room. A living will simply

does not include enough detail to provide guidance for all possible situations. It must first be reviewed by your doctors and considered in light of your current illness and after discussion with the person you have designated in your DPOA-HC as your decision maker.

The limitations of a living will can present a problem for individuals with serious or advanced illness. This can include individuals who have a terminal illness, those who are likely to experience a medical emergency due to their health condition(s), those with a life expectancy of less than a year or two, and those with frailty and progressive decline. This includes individuals in the later stages of Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias. If an individual with this type of serious illness were to collapse and be brought to the emergency room, it is possible that they might receive unwanted treatments—such as resuscitation or being put on a ventilator—while their advance directives are located and reviewed.

POLST overcomes this problem by serving as “active orders” that are portable and actionable in all health care settings—emergency rooms, hospitals, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities. It gives individuals with serious illness greater control over their end-of-life care.

If a health care provider, an individual, or the individual’s designated decision maker believe that a POLST would be beneficial, a discussion is held involving the individual’s physician or health care provider as well as the patient and/or their decision maker. The completed POLST is then signed by the patient’s doctor/provider and the patient or their decision maker, and bright pink copies are made for the patient to carry with them.

For more information on POLST in Pennsylvania, visit papolst.org. To find out information about POLST in other states, go to polst.org. ■

Pittsburgh Airport Supports the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program

The Pittsburgh International Airport is proud to support the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program. Many disabilities, such as autism, chronic pain, epilepsy, low vision, hearing loss, dementia, anxiety disorders, and brain injuries, are not immediately obvious to others. When traveling with someone who has an invisible disability, you can choose to wear a sunflower as a discreet way to indicate to airport staff that you may need some additional support when going through the airport processes. The sunflower is recognized at more than 220 airports worldwide. Sunflower lanyards, bracelets, and pins are available free of charge at the landside and airside information desks. Requests for an identifier to be shipped in advance can be sent to info@flypittsburgh.com. ■



Outreach Happenings

By Melita Terry, BS, Community Engagement Coordinator

Outreach and engagement activities at the University of Pittsburgh Alzheimer's Disease

Research Center (ADRC) are in full swing. In-person engagement activities have been reinvigorated and are being consistently scheduled. Through various collaborations and events, the ADRC has continued to expand its impact, with the goals of heightening awareness, increasing education, and boosting recruitment in its research studies.

At the start of the year, the ADRC's outreach arm marked Black History Month by partnering with the National Council of Dementia Minds and Black Dementia Minds for an interactive webinar. This event, titled *For Such a Time as This*, showcased seven Black individuals living with dementia. Fayron Epps, an associate professor and director of community and research engagement at Emory University's Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, led a discussion session with the individuals featured in the webinar. This collaboration also led to Epps' being the keynote speaker for the Walter Allen Memorial Community Lecture in the spring. Her presentation was titled "Understanding Dementia in the Black Community."

The Tea & Talk series, which was paused in 2022, resumed in March with guest speaker Tracey McCants Lewis, chief people officer and general counsel for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

The ADRC actively participated in the Senior Jazz Connection program from May through September 2023. As one of the trusted resource vendors, the ADRC provided information to approximately 800 members of the Hill District and other communities.

August witnessed the collaboration between the University of Pittsburgh Community Engagement Center and the ADRC to organize the inaugural Health and Wellness Screening Fair. The event's objective was to foster holistic well-being by providing screenings for various health metrics like blood pressure, cholesterol, and memory. Attendees also gained access to valuable resources from different organizations, ensuring a comprehensive health care experience.

Additionally, the ADRC conducted multiple presentations across the city. These presentations aimed not only to raise awareness about Alzheimer's disease and related dementias but also to equip caregivers and individuals dealing with these conditions with practical strategies.

If you are interested in having the ADRC engage with your community or in joining a monthly caregiver support group, please contact Melita Terry at 412-692-2712 or met106@pitt.edu. ■



Pitt Launches National Sports Brain Bank

Traumatic brain injury has long been considered a risk factor for the development of neurodegenerative diseases. Specifically, a condition called chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) has been linked to a history of repetitive head trauma, as may be obtained during participation in contact sports or similar activities. Currently, CTE can only be diagnosed after death through a brain autopsy, presenting a major obstacle for studying this disease. There are many open questions about the frequency of CTE related to different levels and types of sport participation and about factors contributing to risk and resilience. There also are many uncertainties about the frequency of clinical symptoms and the range of brain-related behaviors that may be caused by CTE.

To create a better infrastructure for finding answers to these questions, the University of Pittsburgh has launched the National Sports Brain Bank (NSBB), led by Alzheimer's Disease Research Center Co-Director Julia Kofler. At the news conference announcing the creation of NSBB in May 2023, former Pittsburgh Steelers stars Jerome Bettis and Merrill Hoge were among the first to commit to participation in the brain bank.

At the core of the brain bank is a registry in which participants will be asked to complete a series of secure online questionnaires about their medical history, athletic history, brain injuries, cognitive abilities, mood, and behavior. A history of known concussion or other brain injury is not required for enrollment. In addition, a study partner will receive a separate set of questionnaires. The research team will follow up with participants on an annual basis for updates on their health. Participants will be asked to donate their brain after death for a detailed autopsy examination and further research studies. As participation in the NSBB registry does not require in-person visits, anyone across the United States is eligible. The only requirement is having access to the internet for completion of the questionnaires. The NSBB team aims to recruit thousands of participants to have wide and diverse representation of different backgrounds, genders, levels of play, and types of sports. ■

For more information about NSBB and how to register, please visit pitt.edu/nsbb.

Local High School Student Gets Creative for a Cause

Autumn Dowiak, a junior at Mt. Lebanon High School, had a very busy summer. In addition to practicing field hockey and completing schoolwork for her honors courses, Autumn spent her time creating fidget blankets for people affected by Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. With the help of her grandmother, Autumn has collected donated supplies and made several lap blankets, each designed to occupy a person's mind and hands during any sort of downtime (see photo).

The idea came from the story of a relative with dementia who unexpectedly reached over and pulled a car's emergency brake while traveling on a highway. No one was injured, but the startling incident drew attention to the need for something to keep this loved one mentally and physically engaged, as she seemed to be constantly searching for something to do, especially with her hands. Autumn and her grandmother decided to create a prototype for a fidget blanket in hopes that it would provide their loved one with an enjoyable source of cognitive and motor stimulation. The blanket was a success, and the family reported that the recipient has been using it daily.



In hopes of helping others, Autumn set to work creating more blankets. One challenge was finding supplies. Once her neighbors learned what Autumn was up to, donations of supplies began pouring in. Autumn now has a set of blankets ready to share with other families. ■

If a fidget blanket sounds like something that might benefit someone you know, please contact MaryAnn Oakley at 412-692-2721 or oakleym@upmc.edu for more information.



Bill Klunk Transitions to New Position

David A. Lewis, MD, Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences, Thomas Detre Professor of Academic Psychiatry, and chair of the Department of Psychiatry in the School of Medicine, recognized the transition of William Klunk, MD, PhD, to Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry status, remarking, "Bill's cornerstone research achievement was his development—in collaboration with Chester Mathis, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Radiology—of Pittsburgh Compound-B, an imaging measure of amyloid burden, a hallmark feature of Alzheimer's disease. This development, along with other important lines of research, led to Bill's wide recognition as one of the world's top scientists working in Alzheimer's disease research." ■

Staff Spotlight

Lindsey Jorda, joined the University of Pittsburgh Alzheimer's Disease Research Center (ADRC) in July 2023. As a neuropsychometrist, she is responsible for administering and scoring the battery of neuropsychological tests given to ADRC research participants.

"The most rewarding part of my job is interacting with participants and connecting with them on a personal level," she says. "Cognitive testing is challenging, so it is a humbling experience to work with people who want to participate in research so they can help others affected by Alzheimer's and advance our understanding of this disease."

Prior to joining the ADRC, Lindsey worked in a research lab studying Huntington's disease at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center. She earned her BA in neuroscience and psychology from Vanderbilt, and she also spent time shadowing a neuropsychologist to gain exposure to the field and to learn about testing and assessment.

Lindsey enjoys reading, traveling, and playing with her dog outside work, and she is looking forward to seeing where her job at the ADRC takes her in her career.

"I am excited to be here at the ADRC and thankful for the opportunity to learn at one of the leading research centers in the field," she says. "I know that this experience will help to prepare me for a career in neuropsychology." ■



Melita Terry Recognized as a Community Wellness Champion

Please join us in congratulating **Melita Terry**, University of Pittsburgh Alzheimer's Disease Research Center community engagement coordinator, whose leadership and dedication to mental health awareness were recognized at a reception kicking off the 2023 Health & Wellness Weekend, organized by the African American Leadership Association. The reception was held at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center and included recognition of the following individuals:

Tammy Bey: Financial Leadership
Orlana Darkins Drewery: Motivational and Spiritual Leadership
Roland Ford: Physical Health Leadership
Tiffany Huff: Motivational Leadership
Sondra Hunter: Entrepreneurship and Community Engagement
Ross Johnson: Financial Leadership
Kevin McNair: Mental Health Leadership
Claudy Pierre: Environmental and Community Engagement
Antoine Smalls: Community Leadership and Engagement

Congratulations to all of these community wellness champions!



Meet More of Our OSCAR Scholars

The OSCAR (Optimizing Scientific Careers in Alzheimer's Research) Scholars Program at the University of Pittsburgh Alzheimer's Disease Research Center (ADRC) was created to provide promising young investigators with targeted career support. It is a one-year program in which emerging scientists are paired with ADRC core leaders to help them gain leadership skills and insight into ADRC structures and programs, enabling them to receive scientific and career mentoring from our established faculty members. In this issue of Pathways, we introduce you to some of our 2023-24 OSCAR scholars.



Marissa Gogniat, PhD

Marissa Gogniat is an assistant professor of neurology in Pitt's School of Medicine. She specializes in the neurobiology of aging and aims to understand the neuroprotective mechanisms of health and wellness in older adults. Her research combines neuroimaging, clinical neuropsychology,

kinesiology, public health, and advanced statistical methodologies to uncover the neural basis of lifestyle factors, particularly physical activity, and their impact on neurodegenerative conditions like Alzheimer's disease.

Gogniat served as a clinical neuropsychology postdoctoral T32 fellow at the Vanderbilt Memory and Alzheimer's Center. As an OSCAR scholar in the Clinical Core, she seeks to enhance her leadership skills, establish connections with field leaders, and foster collaborations with peers.



Christi Kolarcik, PhD

Christi Kolarcik is a research assistant professor of pathology in Pitt's School of Medicine. She is dedicated to determining the biological mechanisms underlying dysfunction in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and frontotemporal dementia (FTD). Kolarcik is specifically interested in the neural

circuit-level mechanisms responsible for the overlapping clinical phenotypes observed in ALS-FTD spectrum disorders. Her long-term goals are to link circuit- to cellular- to molecular-level events in ALS and FTD, thereby informing the design of therapeutic strategies.

As an OSCAR scholar in the Clinical Core, Kolarcik looks forward to establishing collaborative partnerships and further developing her leadership and mentorship skills.



Jr Jiun "Jean" Liou, PhD

Jean Liou is a postdoctoral associate in bioengineering who specializes in using neuroimaging and biomarkers for diagnostic and therapeutic applications in Alzheimer's disease (AD). Her research goals involve advancing diagnostic tools through a combination of imaging modalities and biomarkers for improved

AD prediction and diagnosis. She also aims to contribute to targeted AD drug development using functional MRI and tau PET scans.

As an OSCAR scholar in the Neuroimaging Core, Liou seeks to establish connections in AD research, gain fresh perspectives, and investigate the discrepancies between in vivo scans and histological observations of tissue degeneration.



Sarah K. Royse, PhD

Sarah Royse is a research instructor in Pitt's Department of Radiology. Her research specializes in the etiology and progression of pathology in Alzheimer's disease and related disorders (ADRD), with a specific focus on African American populations. Using innovative neuroimaging techniques,

she aims to assess ADRD biomarkers in relation to exposures more common in this population. Royse also seeks to enhance causal interpretations in observational ADRD neuroimaging studies through the application of epidemiological methods.

As an OSCAR scholar in the Neuroimaging Core, Royse aims to develop leadership skills for transdisciplinary ADRD research and to acquire practical management techniques for complex research projects. Additionally, she hopes to accelerate her professional growth by observing effective leadership and management strategies in ADRD research.



Lilcelia A. "CeCe" Williams, PhD

CeCe Williams is a postdoctoral trainee in Pitt's Integrated Clinical and Geroscience Research Training Program and an instructor in the Department of Physician Assistant Studies in Pitt's School of Health and Rehabilitation Studies. Her research focuses on health disparities in Alzheimer's disease and

related dementias (ADRD) experienced by racial and ethnic minority communities. Driven by her background in health care administration and the identification of system barriers, she aims to establish sustainable practices for equitable access to quality patient-centered care for minoritized communities. Her goal is to create inclusive health care environments that empower minoritized patients to actively participate in and advocate for their health care.

Through the OSCAR Scholars Program, as part of the Outreach, Recruitment, and Engagement Core, Williams seeks collaboration opportunities and intends to gain expertise in designing qualitative research studies with large data sets, grantsmanship, and dissemination.

With Gratitude

The University of Pittsburgh Alzheimer's Disease Research Center thanks the following individuals and organizations for their generous donations received between Jan. 1, 2023, and Aug. 31, 2023.

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Research Studies

Get Involved! We are in constant need of participants for important research studies. Contact the University of Pittsburgh Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at 412-692-2700 or oakleym@upmc.edu.

AHEAD Study

Description: The AHEAD study is aimed at preventing Alzheimer's disease (AD) or another dementia in cognitively normal people who may be at risk due to intermediate or elevated levels of amyloid in their brain when measured by a positron emission tomography (PET) scan. Visit aheadstudy.org for more information.

Study Length: Four years

Study Requirements:

- 55-80 years of age
- Normal thinking and memory abilities
- Willing to learn your amyloid results (intermediate, elevated or not elevated), which may relate to your risk of developing AD or another dementia
- Have a trusted family member or friend (a study partner) who can accompany you to a few key study visits and be available by phone to answer questions about your memory and thinking
- Willing and able to receive regular intravenous (IV) infusions of the investigational study drug or a placebo once or twice a month for up to four years

Contact: Paige Tacey at 412-692-2717 or taceyp@upmc.edu or

Thomas Baumgartner at 412-692-2716 or baumgartnertc@upmc.edu

Dementia with Lewy Bodies Consortium

Description: The purpose of this study is to collect clinical information, brain imaging scans, and biological samples from people who have dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB). This information will help researchers improve the diagnosis, care, and treatment of patients with this disease.

Study Length: Five years

Study Requirements:

- 40-90 years of age
- Diagnosis of DLB or high likelihood of it
- A study partner who will accompany you to all study visits

Contact: Cary Zik at 412-692-2719 or zikcl@upmc.edu or MaryAnn Oakley at 412-692-2721 or oakleym@upmc.edu

Escitalopram for Agitation in Alzheimer's Disease (S-CitAD)

Description: The study is designed to examine the efficacy and safety of escitalopram in combination with a psychosocial intervention (PSI) as treatment for agitation in Alzheimer's disease (AD) patients.

Study Length: Six months

Study Requirements:

- Diagnosis of AD with significant agitation/aggression
- A study partner who will accompany you to all study visits

Contact: Patricia Henderson at 412-692-2703 or hendersonpl@upmc.edu or MaryAnn Oakley at 412-692-2721 or oakleym@upmc.edu

Facilitating Optimal Routines in Aging (For Aging)

Description: The purpose of this study is to help researchers find out if regular sessions with a rehabilitation specialist can help older adults improve their performance of daily activities. Researchers hope their findings will lead to better ways to support older adults and help them to maintain independence for as long as possible.

Study Length: 15 months

Study Requirements:

- 60 years of age or older
- Diagnosis of mild cognitive impairment
- Difficulty with managing daily tasks, such as money management, medication management, technology use, preparing meals, or shopping

Contact: Josh Woolford at 412-383-6752 or jww49@pitt.edu or MaryAnn Oakley at 412-692-2721 or oakleym@upmc.edu



Alzheimer's Disease Research Center

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