

FINDINGS

2019 SPRING NEWSLETTER

Devoted Omaha couple, Carol and Rick Russell, receives Lifesaver Award

Written by Tom O'Connor for UNMC Today



Left to right: Rik Bonness, Carol and Rick Russell

One of Omaha's most devoted couples—Carol and Rick Russell—received the Lifesaver Award on April 29 at the 17th Annual Spring Tribute Luncheon for the Nebraska Coalition for Lifesaving Cures (NCLC) at Happy Hollow Club.

The award is given each year by the coalition to recognize individuals who have made a difference in the world through their passionate support of medical research.

“Rick and Carol have been steadfast supporters of research and the

university as a whole,” said Victoria Kohout, executive director of the NCLC. “They’ve been with us from the very beginning and are so deserving of this honor. It was our pleasure to recognize them for their tremendous commitment.”

Carol earned a master's degree in pathology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and went on to work as a medical technologist for several years in the UNMC lab of Rashid Al-Rashid, M.D., the first pediatric hematologist/oncologist in Nebraska.

She was one of the founding members of Nebraskans for Research (NFR), a grassroots support group that was formed when UNMC's fetal and stem cell research programs were under attack by research opponents. NFR merged with NCLC in 2007 and the combined organization continued under the NCLC name.

Carol's volunteerism in the community is legendary, Kohout said. Among the countless organizations she has served are the University of Nebraska President's Advisory Council, the Midlands Latino Community Development Corporation, Children's Square U.S.A., the EngAge Wellness program at the Home Instead Center for Successful Aging at UNMC, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, the NET Foundation and the Legislative Task Force on Human Trafficking.

In accepting the Lifesaver Award, Rick Russell acknowledged Carol's huge presence in the community.

“I feel like I'm getting the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor,” he joked.

But Rick's accomplishments are plentiful as well. He is president and

Devoted Omaha couple, Carol and Rick Russell, receives Lifesaver Award (continued)

CEO of Millard Lumber Inc., a company founded by his father in 1948. He also has served on numerous boards including the UNMC Board of Counselors, the Peter Kiewit Foundation, the Metropolitan Omaha Builders Association, Children’s Hospital & Medical Center, the Omaha branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and the Alliance for Business Ethics.

Both Rick and Carol are board members of the Coalition.

Rik Bonness, a previous recipient of the Lifesaver Award in 2005, introduced the Russells at the luncheon.

“Research is personal to Carol and Rick’s family, as it is for mine,” said Bonness, an Omaha attorney who has two sons with type 1 diabetes. “Several years ago, their son, Mark, was in a serious accident. When Rick and Carol arrived at the hospital, they were told Mark might not survive. He was suffering from inner cranial swelling. But, thanks to advances in medical research to treat his condition, he did survive—and is here today to help us celebrate his parents.”

He added, “Rick and Carol have provided powerful voices in our community to make lives better—and to save lives—through the miracles of medical research.”

“Rick and Carol have been steadfast supporters of research and the university as a whole,” said Victoria Kohout, executive director of the NCLC. “They’ve been with us from the very beginning and are so deserving of this honor. It was our pleasure to recognize them for their tremendous commitment.”



Jingwei Xie, Ph.D., Receives Maurer Scientific Achievement Award

Written by Tom O'Connor for
UNMC Today

One of UNMC's rising research stars, Jingwei Xie, Ph.D., received the Chancellor Emeritus Harold M. Maurer, M.D. and Beverly Maurer Scientific Achievement Award at the Tribute Luncheon.

The award is named after the Maurers, who have been longtime supporters of UNMC's research enterprise. Dr. Maurer served as UNMC chancellor from 1999 to 2014. Beverly Maurer is a founding member of Nebraskans for Research, which merged with NCLC and formed the organization that exists today.

A biomedical engineer, Dr. Xie is an associate professor and research scientist in the UNMC Department of Surgery-Transplant and is part of the Mary and Dick Holland Regenerative Medicine Program.

His research is aimed at gaining a better understanding of materials and cell/tissue interaction and for developing a better design of biomedical devices/materials for use in health care. He also is involved in the development of novel formulations for local drug delivery.

James Turpen, Ph.D., a member of the NCLC board who retired from UNMC in 2017 after serving as professor in the UNMC Department of Genetics, Cell Biology and



Left to right: Andy Holland, Dr. Nora Sarvetnick and Dr. Xie

Anatomy and as associate vice chancellor for academic affairs, presented the award to Dr. Xie.

Dr. Turpen said, "Dr. Xie epitomizes the goal of this award, which is to recognize outstanding mid-career faculty whose research has the potential to lead to lifesaving cures."

In 2017, he also received a four-year, \$1.3 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to study the nanofiber-based local delivery of immunomodulating compounds for prevention of surgical site infections (SSIs).

The nanofiber sutures contain vitamin D, which is thought to be able to induce production of an infection-fighting peptide at the surgical site. If proven successful in transgenic mice, the nanofiber sutures could represent an important advance in the prevention of SSIs, a multibillion-dollar challenge each year in the United States.

Dr. Xie is currently working with Mark Carlson, M.D., professor,

surgery-general surgery, to try to develop a hernia mesh, which would allow human tissue to grow into the mesh and form firm attachments to it. In essence, the body would absorb the material, thus reducing the risk of infection and strengthening the native tissue.

The team will test the mesh in porcine models in hopes of heading toward FDA testing and approval.

Previous Honorees

2015

David F. Mercer, M.D., Ph.D.

2016

Tammy Kielian, Ph.D.

2017

Rebecca Oberley-Deegan,
Ph.D.

2018

Justin Mott, M.D., Ph.D.

Bioethics Expert Answers the Question, “Do We Have the Right to Try?”

Do terminal patients have the right to gain access to yet unproven drugs or other medical interventions that they could not otherwise obtain? According to bioethics expert Beth Roxland, J.D., M. Bioethics, as a result of the relatively recent emergence of a grass roots movement that has resulted in this type of law passing in 41 states, including Nebraska (and at the federal level, though with some differences in details), they have the right to ask.

Roxland, a seasoned attorney and bioethicist with multifaceted experience across industry, law, government and academia, told the audience at the April 23, 2019 Science Café sponsored by the Nebraska Coalition for Lifesaving Cures that such laws are intended

to gain access, but in reality they comprise only a right to seek or ask for such therapies. There is no requirement for the pharmaceutical manufacturers to provide such agents or to tightly control the cost if they choose to do so. Likewise, the patient must find a physician who is willing to call for such a treatment.

“The process is also free from oversight by any type of external review group like an institutional review board,” Roxland said.

She went on to tell those attending that an additional complicating factor is there is currently an FDA approved route to “compassionate use” approval of very similar therapies that does have rapid oversight approval and is allowed to proceed 99 percent of the time.

“The bottom line is that Right to Try laws often have minimal impact on the kinds or speed at which nontraditional therapies actually occur,” Roxland said.

Careful, stem cell therapy unproven

By Janet Steele, professor of biology and acting chair of the Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Nebraska at Kearney

Originally written for the Kearney Hub



Janet Steele

More than 500 clinics in the United States offer unproven stem cell therapy, making stem cell tourism a domestic problem. Stem cells have the potential to develop into any of the body’s 200 different kinds of cells and may potentially offer treatments for diseases that currently have few or no treatments.

The only stem cell-based products that have FDA approval, however, are those made from blood-forming cells (hematopoietic progenitor cells), which are derived from umbilical cord blood. Stem cells from bone marrow also are



routinely used to treat patients with cancer or other disorders of the blood or immune system, and this treatment also has FDA approval. It is important to note that these stem cell products are used to treat a limited number of specific conditions in patients with diseases that affect the ability of the body to produce blood cells.

Any other advertised use of stem cells to treat any other condition currently is not approved by the FDA.

Umbilical cord blood products, for example, are not FDA-approved biologics for treating orthopedic conditions. Therefore, the observation that a few medical practitioners in Nebraska have recently started to offer stem cell therapy as a treatment for painful joint conditions is alarming.

In order to study the potential effects of stem-cell therapy, investigators must apply to the FDA for an investigational new drug application and be approved prior to the start of a clinical trial. Clinical trials are well-controlled studies and potential participants must sign a consent form that identifies the institutional review board that assures protection of their rights and welfare. During the last year, the FDA sent warnings to 45 manufacturers and health care providers regarding their unapproved use of stem cells in treatments and products.

All medical procedures have an element of risk and consumers should be especially cautious of unapproved treatments. The FDA is increasing its regulatory oversight into the unapproved use of stem cells, focusing first on high-risk procedures such as injections into the brain, spinal cord and eye. While the risk associated with stem cell therapy for orthopedic conditions is low, patients who have received unapproved stem cell treatment have suffered infections, blindness and tumor growth.

Testimonials from patients often are used as documentation that stem cell treatment works. The placebo effect, however, can be powerful. A controlled study of 165 patients, published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2002, demonstrated that patients who had a sham arthroscopic procedure for knee osteoarthritis reported levels of pain no different from those patients who had either arthroscopic lavage or debridement.

The scientific literature concerning the effectiveness of stem cell therapy for arthritic joints does not support the number of clinics offering this treatment option. Older individuals are particularly vulnerable as they may not be good candidates for surgery and are desperate for a new treatment option. Stem cell therapy costs thousands to tens of thousands of dollars and, because its effectiveness is not backed up by

medical science, is not covered by insurance or Medicare.

The University of Nebraska at Kearney chapter of Sigma Xi, the scientific research honor society, urges the public to be cautious of unapproved stem cell treatments. While the FDA is increasing its regulatory oversight of these procedures, it is not currently investigating stem cell therapy for orthopedic conditions as the risk of serious medical complications from the procedure is low. Therefore, patient education is key to making informed decisions regarding unproved treatment options. Stem cell treatments for arthritic joints are not backed by evidence-based research and bring false hope to patients for what could be a significant out-of-pocket expense.

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