MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR
Greetings everyone and welcome to the Spring issue of In Translation. CICATS has had a busy and productive spring! In this issue you can read about our exciting news of The Kavli Foundation extending—and increasing—their investment in CICATS, as well as Dr. Pramod Srivastava’s ovarian cancer vaccine starting its clinical trial here at UConn Health. We hosted a seminar featuring Dr. Elisabet Borsheim from the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, and the CICATS Biostatistics Center hosted the Hartford Area SAS Users Group. I also encourage you to read the profile on our Health Disparities Fellow, Lauren Branche, M.S.; it has been a pleasure having her in our office.

- Dr. Cato T. Laurencin

FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE
1. The Kavli Foundation increases investment to CICATS
2. CIG directors lead world’s first ovarian cancer vaccine trial
3. CICATS Seminar Series: A Kavli BRAIN Event welcomed Dr. Elisabet Borsheim
4. CICATS hosted the Hartford Area SAS Users Group
5. CICATS’ ‘Science Cafes’ highlighted in Hartford Business Journal
6. Meet Lauren Branche, MS: CICATS Health Disparities Fellow

ALSO INCLUDED
+ CICATS Membership
+ Upcoming Events
+ CICATS Spotlight
The Kavli Foundation increases investment to CICATS

In Farmington, the Connecticut Institute for Clinical and Translational Science at UConn (CICATS) works to promote education, collaboration, and convergence research across the campus and in the community. They’ve found great success by bringing together UConn faculty, clinicians, and researchers for in-depth conversations on current scientific topics.

These informal gatherings began with an initial grant from The Kavli Foundation under their “Kavli BRAIN Coffee Hour” program. CICATS calls them Science Cafés, in honor of a national grassroots movement to foster scientific discovery and discussion. These groups cover topics that are based on CICATS’ Core Interest Groups, which range from obesity, to health disparities, to cancer control and prevention.

“We see a big need in bringing faculty, scientists, and clinicians together across the region and across the University,” said Cato T. Laurencin, M.D., Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer of CICATS. “In terms of collaboration, one of the major ways we do that is with the creation and support of CICATS Core Interest Groups throughout the University. The cafés are an important part of that because they’re a convenient meeting place for discussions to happen.”

Now, in recognition of CICATS’ initial success, The Kavli Foundation has renewed and increased their initial investment, ensuring that the cafés will continue and expand in the pursuit of advanced scientific knowledge and research.

“The Kavli Foundation seeks to catalyze cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration through the Kavli Coffee Hours program,” said Miyoung Chun, Executive Vice President of Science Programs at The Kavli Foundation. “We are delighted to support the CICATS Kavli Coffee Hours to promote interaction between investigators from different disciplines.”

“The Kavli Foundation has found the value that CICATS is bringing in terms of convergence, which is the coming together of different disciplines to create new ways of thinking and new science,” said Dr. Laurencin. “Their continued support with this new funding shows that we are on track with what we’re doing, in terms of being able to encourage and develop research opportunities here at the University.”

One of the biggest success stories comes from the Personalized Immunotherapy Core Interest Group, led by Pramod Srivastava, Ph.D., M.D., Director of the Carole and Ray Neag Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Center for Immunotherapy of Cancer and Infectious Diseases. The support and funding through CICATS helped Dr. Srivastava advance his groundbreaking vaccine to treat ovarian cancer.
“We’ve done a lot of high-profile activities over the past several years that have translated into a return on investment that goes beyond dollars and cents,” said Dr. Linda K. Barry, M.D., FACS, Assistant Director and Chief Operating Officer, CICATS. “We’ve invested in our faculty and facilitated new partnerships that have translated into increased publications and increased grants. The support we’ve received from The Kavli Foundation will allow us to continue these efforts – a win-win for UConn and the communities we serve.”

Fostering collaborative research is just one aspect of CICATS’s mission. CICATS also works alongside community partners to address health disparities and mentors established, emerging, and future scientists from underrepresented groups.

“We strongly believe in mentoring – and in developing future mentors as well,” said Dr. Laurencin. “We have the M1 Mentoring Program, which specifically trains and develops individuals to work as mentors for minority individuals across the institution. We’ve also focused on workforce development with our Young Innovative Investigator Program, which develops the next generation of clinical scientists.”

CICATS is seeing significant momentum with their work. They’ve graduated the first class of Young Innovative Investigators and are expecting the new incoming class shortly. CICATS is a recipient of a National Institutes of Health (NIH) BUILD Award aimed at developing a national pipeline of underrepresented scientists. More recently, the organization’s 2nd Annual National Health Disparities Elimination Summit was highly successful, as nearly 300 people came together from across the region and the country to discuss health topics affecting communities nationwide including asthma, environmental justice, and gun violence in urban communities. CICATS remains focused on improving community health and developing the scientists and researchers of tomorrow.

“I think we’ve had great results with our work,” said Dr. Laurencin. “We’re delighted with where we are as an organization and where we’re going moving forward.”

Learn more about CICATS programs, research resources, and services at cicats.uconn.edu.

The Kavli Foundation is an organization dedicated to the goals of advancing science for the benefit of humanity and promoting increased public understanding and support for scientists and their work. To learn more, visit kavlifoundation.org.

This article was originally published by Tiffany Ventura Thiele of The UConn Foundation.

What is Translational Science?

A highly interdisciplinary field, the goal of translational science is to combine disciplines, resources, expertise, and techniques to promote enhancements in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of clinical problems within the global healthcare system. The term “translational” simply refers to the movement of scientific findings to helping people through developing potential treatments for disease.
CIG directors lead world’s first ovarian cancer vaccine trial

Three directors from two CICATS Core Interest Groups: Women’s Cancer Consortium Core Interest Group (CIG) and Personalized Immunology CIG: Dr. Pramod Srivastava, Dr. Susan Tannenbaum, and Dr. Molly Brewer, are part of the world’s first personalized-genomics driven ovarian cancer vaccine clinical trial. Recruitment for the trial, which will take place at UConn Health, has begun and will be led by Dr. Tannenbaum. Dr. Srivastava, who is the director of the Neag Comprehensive Cancer Center at UConn Health, invented the groundbreaking vaccine, and Dr. Brewer and Karen Metersky, APRN, will serve as co-investigators.

Check out the original article published in UConn Today and a May 8 lead feature in the Hartford Business Journal.

CICATS Seminar Series: A Kavli BRAIN Event welcomed Dr. Elisabet Borsheim

Elisabet Borsheim, Ph.D., from the Arkansas Children’s Nutrition Center and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, presented “Muscle protein synthesis and breakdown; regulation by nutrients and exercise” at a recent CICATS Seminar Series: A Kavli BRAIN Event at UConn Health.

Hosted by CICATS, the CICATS Biostatistics Center, and The Kavli Foundation, 50 people were in attendance for this CME-approved event, which was held in the Low Auditorium at UConn Health.

Dr. Borsheim has a broad background in physiology, specifically energy and substrate metabolism. She is well familiar with all aspects of performing human studies in healthy and clinical populations, and also has expertise in pre-clinical studies.

CICATS hosted the Hartford Area SAS Users Group (HASUG)

On February 19, CICATS hosted the Hartford Area SAS Users Group (HASUG) at the Cell and Genome Sciences Building at UConn Health. Guest speaker, Andrew T. Kuligowski from the Southeast SAS Users Group presented two talks: “Parsing Useful Data out of Unusual Formats Using SAS” and “Working with Character Data.” Deb Paturzo, MS, a research associate at UConn Health, presented “SAS Programming and Data Management.”

CICATS ‘Science Cafes’ highlighted in Hartford Business Journal

In the May 8 edition of the Hartford Business Journal, Staff Writer John Stearns highlighted the CICATS Science Cafe concept and how it played a role in funding the research of Dr. Pramod Srivastava.

Science Cafes, which are hosted by CICATS’ Core Interest Groups, are informal events designed to engage the public with interactive discussions in the topic area of the host CIG, and increase opportunities for collaborative research. To learn more about CIGs or Science Cafes, please click to be redirected to our website or contact Dr. Kevin Lo.
Meet Lauren Branche, MS: CICATS Health Disparities Fellow

Lauren Branche, M.S., a second year student in the UConn School of Medicine, New England Regional Director of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), and Health Disparities Fellow at CICATS, didn’t always believe medical school would be a reality. However, she found inspiration in the stories of two of her own relatives, her great-grandfather, Dr. George C. Branche Sr., and her grandfather, Dr. Matthew D. Branche Sr., who became prominent Black physicians. Stories of their strength and perseverance inspired Lauren to never doubt her own. However, her career path was truly not solidified until experiencing two life-changing events.

Lauren grew up in New Rochelle, New York, which is part of Westchester County, a county with one of the largest wealth gaps in the country. She experienced firsthand the massive differences in wealth and health-building opportunities across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines. As a middle-schooler, Lauren's best friend lost his mom to Stage IV Breast Cancer. By the time it was discovered by doctors, it was already terminal. It was the first experience with death for Lauren, and she found herself thinking: ‘Why did this have to happen?’ She also observed differences in the way people of color, like her best friend’s mother, experienced the medical system and the consequences of these differences on their mental and physical well-being. She took this experience with her, deciding that she would be a doctor that treated all patients with respect regardless of their backgrounds.

High school is where Lauren realized a career in medicine was in her future. Her favorite classes were always science, and while her high school did not offer anatomy, she turned to books and the Internet to stem her curiosity.

“For me, medicine was the perfect way to combine my love of science and my love for people with my desire to mend the social and economic injustices faced by marginalized populations,” explained Lauren.

After graduation, Lauren entered Tufts University in Medford, Mass. She majored in psychology with a pre-medical focus. Though taking classes full time and working to help pay her tuition was challenging, she was getting closer every day to achieving her goal of medical school while participating in Tufts’ HCOP (Health Careers Opportunity Program) program.

A meticulous planner who likes a full plate, life and school were advancing just as she anticipated. In the fall semester of her senior year, Lauren was looking ahead to next steps after graduation. She was preparing for her MCATs and soon after, submitting medical school applications. However, shortly before Thanksgiving, life dealt Lauren a fate for which she had not planned. She was in a severe car accident and sustained a traumatic brain injury as well as numerous bodily injuries.

All things considered, she managed to finish her classes and graduate on time. Still not fully healed, she decided to take some time off.

Lauren went through months of physical therapy, speech therapy, and learning how to just ‘be’ all over again. A self-described people person, it was challenging. She worked for a year at Tufts University as a Pre-Health Advisor, where she developed programming and mentored underrepresented minority students interested in health careers. During the same year, she also worked at the Tufts Africana Center where she continued to demonstrate her passion for mentoring minority students. In the year following, she began working as a phlebotomist at a LGBTQ HIV Specialty Clinic in Connecticut, where she was also able to shadow a physician, nurse practitioner, and a nurse, gaining valuable clinical experience. Not one to be slowed down, Lauren also began to study for her MCATs.

Two years after her accident, Lauren entered Tufts University School of Medicine and earned her Master’s degree in Biomedical Science.
Lauren credits her perseverance through the adversities faced in her life to the strong support and guidance she received from her mother, Cecelia Allen-Branche, and her numerous mentors. Her Pre-Med Advisor at Tufts, Shirley Smith, M.A., was always there to encourage Lauren, helping her through the tough days and reminding her to not give up on her goal of medical school – telling Lauren to have the mindset of ‘not if, but when’ she gets in to medical school.

“Inspired by well intention, but driven by intentional action, Lauren combines her personal experiences with cultural diversity and health disparities to improve the health outcomes in underserved communities,” said Smith, who now serves as the director of student diversity and enrichment at the University of South Florida. “Lauren embodies the compassion, intellect, and cultural competence that is essential in the next generation of health care professionals.”

And sure enough, Lauren was accepted into the UConn School of Medicine where she is currently pursuing a dual degree: MD, MPH. Why dual degrees?

“I decided the MPH would allow me to work toward health equity from all necessary angles,” she explained. “I realized that if my ultimate goal is to work towards the elimination of racial and ethnic health disparities, it will take a systemic approach. As a physician, you treat patients on an individual level, but interventions must encompass work on the community and national level as well. I wanted to understand the behaviors, policies, and institutions in place that ensure differences in resources and opportunities based on the false value given to socially constructed groups, in order to develop efficient, innovative solutions.”

And when you ask Lauren what she wants to do upon graduation, her response is not brief. She aspires to practice family medicine and gradually shift into health policy and academic medicine where she can work to improve medical school curriculum to reflect a culturally-safe approach to learning and treating patients. Current curriculum does not provide students with exposure to different cultures and understanding how to relate to someone with a different background or different appearance from your own.

Spurred by her earlier experiences, helping communities and working with leaders to improve access and financial means to health care is also a priority for Lauren. After seeing loss at an early age and then going through her own trauma, she believes these experiences will help her be a better doctor as a result. She experienced flaws in the system and can now direct her energy to fixing them.

In the meantime, Lauren is focusing her energy on the remaining two years of medical school. As the Health Disparities Fellow at CICATS through the end of June, Lauren is working with the NMA Cobb Institute to plan a Racism in Medicine Consensus Panel, as well as reestablishing the CICATS Community Advisory Board (CAB). She also starts her surgical rotation in July. 

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- Ensure that your research meets regulatory requirements for involving human subjects
- Find funding opportunities for your research project
- Learn about advances in clinical and translational research from bench to the community
- And more!

Please contact Eliza Folsom for more information: folsom@uchc.edu

UPCOMING EVENTS

Medical Education Grand Rounds at the UConn School of Medicine
June 19, 2017  |  7:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.
Low Learning Center, UConn Health
Cultural Competency and Mentorship: Becoming More Effective Mentors

Presented by CICATS' M1 Mentors: Elaine Choung-Hee Lee, Ph.D., Syam Nukavarapu, Ph.D., Anne Delany, Ph. D.
Moderated by Linda Barry, M.D., FACS

Lawrence G. Raisz, M.D. Lectureship featuring Dr. Hannah Valantine
October 5, 2017
Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity at the National Institutes of Health (NIH)
More details to come

CICATS HIGHLIGHTS

Shania Aponte-Paris, YIIP Class of 2016, with her lab mentor, Kimberly Dodge-Kafka, Ph.D., has been awarded a National Institutes of Health (NIH) Supplemental Grant

Aaliyah Riccardi, YIIP Class of 2016, has been selected to participate in the Endocrine Society’s 2017 Summer Research Fellowship

Bianca Montano, 2016 BUILD Scholar, has had her abstract accepted for the Society for Biomaterials Conference and she will be providing a poster presentation

More details to come