



A newsletter for employees of
the Portland VA Medical Center

In the News

September 2003

VISN 20 CARES Hearings Set for September

VISN 20 CARES hearings will be held September 26 at the PVAMC Vancouver Division and September 29 at the Walla Walla VAMC. The independent CARES Commission has received the CARES Draft National Plan from Secretary Principi's office, and members now are traveling across the country to obtain input from veterans, VA employees and other stakeholders. Although only invited panels of stakeholders will testify, CARES hearings will be open to the public, and anyone can submit written comments to the CARES Commission at the hearings, by mail or on the Commission web site at www.carescommission.va.gov

As you know, most VISN's in the country were recently asked to revisit their CARES Market Plans and study the possibility of realignment/mission change/closures at some facilities, including Walla Walla, White City and Vancouver. *VISN 20 is analyzing various scenarios for*

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Molly Benson Named Oregon Mother of the Year

Congratulations to PVAMC Critical Care Secretary **Molly Benson**, who was recently named Oregon's Mother of the Year by American Mothers, Inc. The honor is being celebrated by her seven children, including PVAMC Patient Advocate **Shaun Benson** and PVAMC Critical Care Secretary **Traci Benson Kainz**.

"Just being nominated was a total surprise," Molly says. It all started when her son Erik, who owns a limousine service, gave a free limo ride to a group headed for a special event at Marylhurst College. His guests, including one of his mother's former high school teachers, were so impressed with the young man that they thought a parenting award was in order. Shortly thereafter, the teacher nominated her erstwhile student for one of the annual Mother of the Year awards given by American Mothers,

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Molly Benson (seated) with daughter Traci Benson Kainz and son Shaun Benson

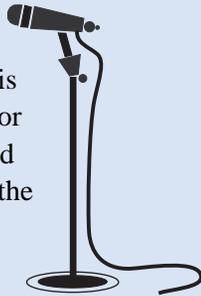
VISN 20 CARES cont.

providing the best care for veterans in areas served by the three VISN facilities and will submit its report to the CARES Program Office in early September. For more information, please see the VISN 20 intranet web site at <http://vha20web1/visn20/cares/index.html> or call Pat Forsyth at Ext. 52975 for hard copies.



Let Us Hear From You

In The News is a newsletter for employees and volunteers at the Portland VA Medical Center. Please submit story ideas or comments to Public Affairs Officer Pat Forsyth by e-mail or call Ext. 52975.



Mother of the Year cont.

Inc., an interfaith organization that since 1935 has been dedicated to preserving moral and spiritual foundations of the family.

“She used to give me homework, and she’s still giving me homework,” Molly says, laughing. “After she nominated me for that award, I must have put in 40 hours of work.” In addition to writing profiles on herself, her husband and each of her seven children, Molly was asked to share her thoughts on parenting. “My philosophy of parenting begins with strong moral values that are faith based, taught by example and a loving respect for all,” she wrote in part. “These values start in the family and expand outward to the community, country and world.”

Molly raised her seven children as a single parent after losing her husband, Leon, to a terminal illness. She has 14 grandchildren. In addition to her devotion to her own family, she has served her community in many roles, such as chairing the Boy Scout Committee in a local troop for more than 15 years. She currently is leading an effort to raise funds and buy a farm in India for impoverished widowed mothers, who may have few opportunities to provide alone for their children. “I’d like to give something that lives on,” she says. “I’d like to leave a little bit of a legacy.”

Molly recently attended the national Mothers of the Year conference in Washington, DC and got a chance to meet this year’s honorees from the other states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. She appeared in May on KATU TV’s A.M. Northwest, rode in a 4th of July parade in Canby and a Vernonia parade on August 2 - her daughter Traci’s birthday.

Roses for Veterans

During Rose Festival week, some of our patients got a pleasant surprise.

The Rose Festival Court visited PVAMC June 5 for the 57th annual Rose Festival Ambassadors Luncheon, sponsored by the American Legion Auxiliary. After lunch, the ambassadors visited hospital patients, presenting each with a rose. Queen Priscilla and her Court are



pictured here with their reluctant PVAMC escorts.

Employees Invited to Chat with CHAMPIONS on September 12

The CHAMPIONS (Career Help and Advancement through Mentoring, Personal Improvement and Opportunities to Nurture Success) program will offer winter workshops for personal and professional growth. Employees are invited to “Chat with the CHAMPIONS” September 12 from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in the Portland Auditorium.

CHAMPIONS workshops guide employees as they develop and improve their work, writing and communications skills. Mentoring is also an important part of the program. Although completion of CHAMPIONS doesn’t guarantee promotion, many employees have benefited (for example, see sidebar on **Don Batz** and **Linda Fordyce**).

To apply for the program, you must have worked at PVAMC (Portland or Vancouver) for at least a year and be a GS-2 through GS-6 or Wage Grade (WG) equivalent in a permanent position. You must have satisfactory work performance, must not be on a performance improvement plan, and must have a commitment to career growth at PVAMC and to completing the entire CHAMPIONS program.

Watch for flyers and broadcasts with more information on the September 12 event. CHAMPIONS applications will be available from Education

(Ext. 57006) and at displays in the Atrium, the Vancouver Canteen and other locations.

Grads Talk About CHAMPIONS

By Kim Winn

Don Batz, Painter and CHAMPIONS graduate, has nothing but good things to say about the CHAMPIONS Program. Don was in the second CHAMPIONS class. He was a WG-2 Housekeeper at the time and felt that his VA career was standing still.

“CHAMPIONS was something I could do to enhance myself, my skills, and my career,” Don says. Since graduating Don has been promoted twice and is now working as a WG-9 Painter for the Portland VA Medical Center. Although not a guarantee of promotion, the program gave him the skills to “fill out the forms” and the confidence to up himself forward for promotion. He’s excited about the direction his career has taken and his smile tells the story!

Linda Fordyce is yet another CHAMPIONS success story. Linda began the CHAMPIONS Program as a GS-5 Program Clerk for the Business Office. She was looking for an opportunity to develop her skills and that’s what she got! The program challenges the students to practice interpersonal skills with their team members, teaches them how to complete paperwork for promotional opportunities, and finally, how to present themselves professionally. Linda states that the main skill she walked away with was how to set goals for herself and follow through. The value she found using her skills is evidenced in her new job as a GS-7 Program Support Assistant for Facilities Management Service in Vancouver.

Kim Winn is the PVAMC Executive Office Manager.



Don Batz



Linda Fordyce

NEWS BRIEFS

VA Announces New Pharmacy Benefit

On July 24, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that some veterans waiting to see VA physicians for the first time may be eligible to receive medications from VA mail-out pharmacies that were prescribed by private doctors. The first prescriptions will be filled under the temporary program on September 22. To be eligible for the benefit, veterans must meet all following conditions:

- Have enrolled in VA health care before July 25, 2003.
- Requested their first primary care appointment with VA before July 25, 2003.
- Have been waiting more than 30 days for their first appointment with a primary care physician on September 22.

For more information, veterans may call the eligibility hotline at 503-273-5289.

PVAMC's First Kidney Transplant Patient Unveils Threads of Life Quilt

On April 30, families of organ transplant recipients and donors gathered at the Threads of Life Quilt unveiling in downtown Portland. Hosted by the PVAMC Liver and Kidney Transplant Programs, the event was part of National Donate Life Month efforts to raise public awareness of the critical need for organ, tissue and blood donations. The quilt, which is made up of squares honoring transplant donors and recipients, was officially unveiled by army veteran **Jamal Boland** and his wife **Priscilla Boland**, of El Paso, Texas. Mr. Boland received a kidney donated by his wife in PVAMC's first kidney transplantation on April 25, 2002.

PVAMC Patient Compliments Medical Center Staff

As workloads soar and resources stretch thin, it's especially nice to hear words of appreciation - like those of the PVAMC patient who recently spoke with patient advocate **Angela Morkert** after he contacted the Director's office asking for an administrator. "I can't believe all the things you do with the number of people you have," he said. "I am amazed at the quality of the people you have working here, everywhere. You hear about shortages of nurses, but somehow you get the best. What is very special is the way the people here care about the veterans . . . I hear some people complain, but I always get the best care and it's free." Morkert explained that we do not consider his care free, but rather care earned by veterans with their service to our country. "The compliments from this veteran stand out for me," she said, "as he has been receiving care here since 1997 and has had contact with many staff during that time."

NW Network Receives Three of VA's 18 Energy Star Awards

Portland, Boise and Puget Sound are among the 18 VA medical centers recently honored with Energy Star Awards for achievements in energy efficiency. The awards are presented by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy. Among the most energy-intensive building types, medical facilities use energy at twice the rate of office space and three times the rate of schools. Energy Star Awards recipients are in the top 25 percent in energy performance among all hospitals in the United States.

New Contracting Program Launched to Help Reduce Wait for Services

Because the demand for care continues to exceed our internal capacity, PVAMC has initiated a new Community Outsourcing Program to partner with providers to deliver specialty and procedural care to veterans who currently cannot be seen in a timely manner in our own departments. Using a special allocation of funding, the new program contracts with community providers and facilities to serve PVAMC patients waiting for specialty diagnostic tests, mental health care, and operative procedures. The program also supports some fee-basis physicians temporarily providing mental health and specialty diagnostic services in-house. Facility contracts are already in place with the Legacy Health System, OHSU, Providence Health System, and McMinnville Surgical Center, with several more pending. For more information, call **Judy Austin** at Ext. 54541.

VA Specialists Highlight Psychiatric Issues in Hepatitis C Patients

The June issue of the journal *Psychiatric Annals* was devoted to articles co-authored by VA clinicians on the importance of diagnosing and treating psychiatric and substance abuse problems in patients with hepatitis C. A guest editor for the issue was **Peter Hauser, M.D.**, Clinical Director of the PVAMC Mental Health Division and Associate Director of the VA Northwest Hepatitis C Resource Center. Hepatitis C is especially common among our nation's veterans, and people with mental health or substance abuse problems have high rates of infection with the hepatitis C virus. For example, at least 80 percent of people who use IV drugs will become infected with the virus within six months of beginning their drug use. "One focus of our center is a collaboration of mental health and liver specialists to successfully treat people whose mental health or substance abuse problems pose special challenges in dealing with treatment regimens and side effects," Dr. Hauser said.

Study Looks at Experience of Nurses with Hospice Patients Who Refuse Food

In the July 24 *New England Journal of Medicine*, Oregon researchers reported on the first study to document experiences of hospice nurses with terminally ill patients who deliberately refuse food and water to hasten their deaths. On the basis of reports by nurses, the research team found that patients in hospice care who stopped eating and drinking were elderly, no longer found meaning in living and usually died a "good" death within two weeks after stopping food and fluids. Among other findings, the researchers also noted almost twice as many reports of patients pursuing this means of hastening death, compared with those who chose assisted suicide. "Voluntary refusal of food and fluids occurs often enough that it must become part of our discussion on end-of-life issues facing care providers, terminally ill patients and their families," said study leader **Linda Ganzini, M.D., M.P.H.**, director of the Palliative Care Fellowship at PVAMC.

New “Blind Signs” Dedicated at PVAMC

The rifle shot that blasted **Kevin Stockton**’s eyes became the genesis of an unexpected benefit for the blind - Blind Signs, an innovative new system that was dedicated August 11 at our medical center.

PVAMC is the first VA medical center in the country and one of the first sites in Oregon to install the system developed by Stockton to guide blind people through their surroundings by identifying bus stops, crosswalks, restrooms and other key locations.

Before being injured in 1999, Stockton was the owner of a Roseburg construction company that, among other projects, built assisted living centers. Only after becoming blind did he realize that his designs had never addressed problems of the visually impaired. The first time he found himself disoriented in the middle of a busy street, Stockton says, he discovered the helpless feeling of being lost amid landmarks of daily life. “And I found out that no matter how long people have been blind, they still have trouble getting around.”

Stockton set to work to design a directional guidance system that would not impede the general public, including handicapped people, and that could be identified underfoot or with a cane. The resultant Blind Signs are grids of parallel markers oriented in a certain direction. Three bars, for example, indicate a mass transit stop, four a crosswalk and five a staircase. This fall, Stockton says, he expects the next phase to be ready for installation - electronics allowing a visually impaired person to “talk” with the Blind Signs.



Dr. Les Burger, VISN 20 Director, and PVAMC Director **Dr. Jim Tuchschiidt** hosted the August 11 dedication. Stockton is Native American, and the ceremony included a traditional dance by the Painted Rock Native American Dance Group, recognizing the relationship of Blind Signs with pathways of the Earth. Master of Ceremonies was **Frank Armstrong**, President of the Oregon State Regional Group, Blinded Veterans Association. “We’re very excited about Blind Signs,” Armstrong says. “This is the best invention since the white cane!”



Left to right,
Dr. James Tuchschiidt,
Mr. Kevin Stockton and
Dr. Les Burger cutting
ribbon at dedication

Research Day Highlights Portland Advances

It was standing room only April 25 at the 2003 PVAMC Research Day, as five speakers presented recent advances in some of the exciting research programs under way at Portland. Speakers and topics included:

Treatment of Alzheimer's Disease.

Researchers led by **Joseph Quinn, Ph.D.**, are trying to develop more effective treatments against Alzheimer's disease, a major public health problem that will only worsen as the population ages. The team is working with a strain of mice that develops a disease much like Alzheimer's, including the typical "plaques" made of a substance called beta amyloid in their brains.

One set of experiments has shown that mice who have their immune system stimulated have less beta amyloid in their brains, possibly because immune cells consume it. Another set of experiments showed that commonly used anti-inflammatory drugs slightly reduced brain beta amyloid, and other tests found that ginkgo biloba failed to change beta-amyloid levels but nonetheless improved memory in the mice. The researchers are following up with studies designed to help them tailor these and other potential therapies for trials in humans.

Speech Recognition in Older Adults. As people age, we have more difficulty understanding speech, especially when the environment is noisy or speech is rapid. Age-related hearing loss accounts for some of this problem, but **Nancy Vaughan, Ph.D.**, and colleagues at the PVAMC-based National Center for Rehabilitative Auditory Research are focusing on the impact of cognitive slowing - a normal hallmark of aging.

Because the processes of understanding speech are very complex, any mental slowing could compromise a listener's ability to carry out these functions. Among other findings, the NCRAR team has demonstrated that younger listeners can recognize and repeat sentences accurately at faster rates than older listeners. Older adults can perform mental tasks with the same accuracy as younger adults, however, if information is presented at a slower speed. The Portland researchers hope their work can lead to improved hearing rehabilitation for older adults. For example, slowed speech could be incorporated into hearing aid technology to accommodate slower rates of speech processing.

Discovery of Genes Controlling Bone Strength. Osteoporosis, the "brittle bones" disease afflicting millions of older Americans, is caused by a weakening of bone that can lead to life-threatening fractures. While human studies have shown that heredity plays a key role in determining bone strength, the precise genes involved are largely unknown. **John Belknap, Ph.D.**, and his colleagues are using modern molecular tech-

niques to search the chromosomes of mice for genes that influence bone strength. They have found several areas on chromosomes that have a strong effect on bone strength in adult mice and have

shown which of these interact to influence the trait. Thus far, the studies have identified one previously unknown gene that clearly influences bone strength.

Because genes in mice and men are often quite similar, these

findings should provide useful insights for further advances in the battle against osteoporosis.

Organ Transplant Rejection.

For most people with end-stage organ disease, the only hope is an organ transplant. Starting with their transplant surgery, patients must again fight for survival, aided by an armamentarium of drugs to prevent organ rejection. These drugs can prevent early rejection but fail to extend long-term organ survival. In order to better understand this problem, **Cindy Wagner, Ph.D.**, and her colleagues are studying rats who have received a heart transplant. As in humans, the team found, long-term organ rejection is characterized by closure of the organ's blood vessels and formation of scars. The changes resemble those seen in coronary artery disease, suggesting something similar is going on.

Because infectious agents such as the bacterium *Chlamydia pneumoniae* (a common cause

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Research Day cont.

of pneumonia) are believed to contribute to coronary artery disease, the Portland team is studying whether this microbe may play a role in organ rejection. So far, their experiments have shown that transplanted hearts are more rapidly rejected in rats infected with this organism, and the infection accelerates blood vessel disease linked with rejection.

Preserving Kidney Function. Advanced kidney disease is a serious health problem, affecting millions of people worldwide. For many years, doctors have recognized that hypertension (high blood pressure) can accelerate kidney damage. **Sharon Anderson, M.D.**, and her team discovered that patients with kidney disease also have high blood pressure in the filtering units of their kidneys. When some of these units are damaged by disease, the remainder start to overwork, developing high blood pressure that eventually leads to scarring. The Portland researchers found that drugs called angiotensin converting enzyme inhibitors (ACE inhibitors) can reduce this kidney hypertension, especially in people with diabetes. After their experiments in rats, clinical studies showed that ACE inhibitors and similar drugs can slow progression of kidney disease in diabetic patients. Studies in Dr. Anderson's lab have also shown that these drugs may be helpful in aging kidneys. Most people lose some kidney function as they age, and the researchers have already shown that ACE inhibitors can slow this age-related loss in animals.

E-mail May Have Saved Portland Employee's Life

Next time you feel the urge to delete that whole string of e-mails without reading them, consider the experience of **Pat Curtis**, PVAMC Program Support Assistant in Radiation Therapy. Pat had reserved a day parking spot for the morning of May 16. By the time she walked up the hill from the lot, she was having trouble breathing and her chest hurt. "I made it to my office, sat down and read that e-mail," she says. That e-mail, about heart attack warning signs, was one of a series sent to all employees at VISN 20 facilities as part of Women's Health Awareness Week.

"I had every one of those symptoms and I started to panic," Pat says. As the e-mail advised, she went to the Emergency Care Unit, where her EKG proved abnormal and blood tests confirmed a heart attack. Because she wasn't a veteran, she was rushed to OHSU, had two angioplasty procedures, and was soon back at work and doing fine. "I had been having symptoms for weeks before but thought it was from exercising," says Pat, who had recently started an exercise program. "I thought I had just strained the muscles in my chest."



She's happy to share her experience with others, because she hadn't known anything about heart attacks in women and hopes others can

E-mail cont.

benefit from her experience, Pat says. "I think that e-mail saved my life!"

The women's health e-mail series was coordinated by **Carole Most**, W.H.C.N.P., Portland VA Women Veterans Program Manager. The one seen by Pat said, in part, "WOMEN: Know your heart attack warning signs! You may experience discomfort, fullness, tightness, squeezing or pressure in the center of your chest that stays more than a few minutes or comes and goes, pressure or pain that spreads to your upper back, shoulders, neck, jaw, or arms. You could also feel dizziness, nausea, clammy sweats, heart flutters or become pale. Some women experience unexplained feelings of anxiety, fatigue or weakness, especially with exertion. Women may also have stomach and abdominal pain, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing. If you have these symptoms, call 911 or have someone drive you to the hospital immediately – do not delay! Insist that hospital staff take your symptoms seriously, do not make you wait and give you a thorough cardiac evaluation, including an EKG and a blood test to check your cardiac enzymes."