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THE TRIBUNE

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Building Healthy Futures

Lifespan Conference Highlights Nutrition's Power to Shape Health at Every Age

Heather Leidy, Ph.D. (center), addresses a question during a panel discussion at the Advancing Arkansas Lifespan Research Conference. Also pictured are, l-r: Laura James, M.D. (moderator), Brian Piccolo, Ph.D., Stacie Jones, M.D., Britni Ayers, Ph.D., and Colin Kay, Ph.D. (moderator).

At the 2025 Advancing Arkansas Lifespan Research Conference, two nationally recognized nutrition scientists emphasized how diet quality throughout life profoundly influences long-term health and resilience.

The daylong event, held Oct. 14 at the UAMS Reynolds Institute on Aging, brought together about 80 researchers and staff from across UAMS and beyond to explore the conference's theme of "Charting a Path to Lifelong Health and Resilience through Nutrition."

The conference featured keynote talks from **Heather Leidy, Ph.D.,** of the University of Texas at Austin, and **Sameera Talegawkar, Ph.D.,** of George Washington University.

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Dear Colleagues,

This month's TRIbune stories showcase several aspects of the Translational Research Institute's programs, including research across the lifespan, workforce development and community engagement.

At the Advancing Arkansas Lifespan Research Conference, national experts **Heather Leidy, Ph.D.,** and **Sameera Talegawkar, Ph.D.,** joined UAMS investigators to discuss how nutrition influences health and resilience from adolescence through older adulthood. Their presentations, along with outstanding talks from our UAMS researchers, illustrated how translational science, from discovery to implementation, can improve health across the lifespan.

That same commitment to translating research into life-saving interventions is embodied by Nakita Lovelady, Ph.D., MPH, a graduate of TRI's K12 Program. Dr. Lovelady, along with her community partner and co-principal investigator, Joyce Raynor, recently secured a $3.8 million NIH grant to continue her community-engaged, hospital-based intervention to help survivors of assault and prevent unsafe gun behaviors. Her success exemplifies our K12 program's purpose: to prepare emerging investigators to secure independent funding and translate research into practice.

I am inspired by the energy and collaboration across our campus. Together, we are advancing research that improves health in Arkansas and beyond.

Sincerely,

Laura James, M.D.
Director, TRI
Associate Vice Chancellor for Clinical and Translational Research, UAMS

Building Healthy Futures (continued from page 1)

Leidy, associate professor in the departments of Nutritional Sciences and Pediatrics at the Dell Medical School, described a "perfect storm" confronting today's adolescents with a combination of heightened nutrient needs, poor diet quality, and rising rates of mental health challenges and obesity.

"Adolescence is one of those under-examined, really important life stages," Leidy said. "It's the bridge between establishing a healthy lifestyle and preserving it as we age."

Drawing on national data from NHANES 2017–2020, she noted that older teens, particularly females, fall short on essential nutrients such as iron, calcium, vitamin D and omega-3s. "Teenage girls have the lowest diet quality of any group," she said. "They're under-consuming nearly everything – calcium, vitamin D, magnesium, iron, protein – you name it."

Her research shows that simply adding a high-protein breakfast can improve appetite control, diet quality and metabolic health. "If you provide a high-protein breakfast of about 24 to 30 grams you can change their appetite and energy balance for the entire day," she said.

In a series of studies, Leidy's team found that teens who ate protein-rich breakfasts reduced evening snacking, stabilized glucose levels and prevented unhealthy fat gain. Yet maintaining those habits is difficult. "Eighty to ninety percent of teens return to skipping breakfast once the intervention ends," she said. "It's not a motivation issue; it's access."

Her "Breakfast in the Classroom" project in Kansas City replaced refined-carb foods with egg-based meals for 585 middle school students. Participation rose sharply, and students reported fewer afternoon cravings. Leidy urged family and school-based solutions: "If you make it tasty and portable, teens will eat it."

Talegawker, the conference's second keynote, shifted the focus to later life. A professor in the Department of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences at George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health, she described how long-term eating patterns influence cardiovascular health, mobility and frailty.

"There are multiple ways to achieve a healthy dietary pattern," she said. "The emphasis should be on fruits, vegetables, legumes, fish and unsaturated fats – foods that support both physical and cognitive health."

Her research, which draws on aging studies in Italy and the United States, shows that older adults who follow a Mediterranean-style diet experience slower physical decline and less frailty. She also found that high consumption of ultra-processed foods was linked to greater frailty, while better cardiovascular health scores, measured by the American Heart Association's Life's Essential 8, were associated with lower risk of dementia, disability and mortality.

"Diet is important," she added, "but movement may be where we can make the biggest difference."

Talegawkar is extending this work to study diet-related metabolites that may explain links between nutrition and frailty. She also co-leads a new Washington, D.C., project examining whether new urban parks and grocery access can influence physical activity and eating behaviors.

The keynote talks framed a day of presentations by UAMS scientists covering topics such as early-childhood nutrition, gut health, collagen and connective tissue, and dietary supplements. Presenters included **Taren Massey-Swindle, Ph.D.; Britni Ayers, Ph.D.; Brian Piccolo, Ph.D.; Stacie Jones, M.D.; Shiloah Kviatkovsky, Ph.D.; Igor Koturbash, M.D., Ph.D.; Nithya Neelakantan, Ph.D.;** and **David Church, Ph.D.**

Moderators were **Elisabet Børsheim, Ph.D., Laura James, M.D., Colin Kay, Ph.D.,** and **Craig Porter, Ph.D.**

Are you an early-career faculty member ready to rise as an independent investigator? The K12 Mentored Research Career Development Awards Program offers two years of protected time, structured mentorship and salary support to help you soar. This NIH-funded opportunity offered through TRI turns promising clinical and translational researchers into competitive, grant-ready scientists.

Letters of Application are due **Dec. 15.**

Ready for takeoff? Here's what to do next:

Click here or use the QR code to view the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA).

FOA

Attend the Zoom Information Session on Monday, Oct. 27, 4:30 p.m. (QR code)

Oct. 27 Zoom

Questions?

Contact Mario Schootman, Ph.D. (mschootman@uams.edu) or Paul Duguid (PDuguid@uams.edu).

TRI K12 Graduate Awarded $3.8 Million NIH Grant

Nakita Lovelady, Ph.D., MPH, a graduate of the UAMS Translational Research Institute's K12 Mentored Research Career Development Award Program, has received more than $3.8 million from the National Institutes of Health to expand her work preventing gun violence in Arkansas.

The award from the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities funds the next phase of Project Heal, a hospital–community partnership focused on helping survivors of violent assault avoid reinjury and recover from trauma.

Working alongside Joyce Raynor, executive director of the Center for Healing Hearts and Spirits and multiple principal investigator, Lovelady will lead a three-year clinical trial testing which mix of supports works best for survivors. These include bedside help during hospitalization, peer support, case management with service vouchers, and virtual group therapy called SELF (Safety, Emotions, Loss & Future).

"This grant allows us to test strategies that help survivors move forward in their lives," Lovelady said. "By combining hospital care, community expertise, and lived experience, Project Heal can create solutions that save lives."

The project is part of NIH's research on community level interventions for firearm and related violence, injury and mortality prevention (CLIF-VP) initiative.

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You're Invited!
Join Us for the 10th Annual Community Partner Celebration

TRI invites you to its 10th Annual Community Partner Celebration on **Friday, Dec. 5 at 6 p.m.** Help us honor the invaluable contributions of UAMS' community partners, researchers, staff and students during this dinner and awards ceremony.

Our community partners have played pivotal roles in the growth of UAMS' community-engaged research, helping to strengthen our shared commitment to improving health across Arkansas. Join us for this special evening at the **Chenal Event Venue, 21 Rahling Circle, Little Rock,** to celebrate and acknowledge our partners who are making a real impact.

Please register here or use the QR code.

Contact: TRI Community Engagement team, 501-291-7301.

Academic-Community Members Complete TRI Training

Twenty-four UAMS-affiliated researchers and community members completed training in TRI's Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Scholars Program Oct. 15. Over six 1.5-hour sessions, lessons included best practices for successful community-academic partnerships, project development and dissemination of research results.

Some of the participants will now enter the second part of the program, in which they form an academic-community partnership and apply for TRI pilot grant funding. The research teams will receive mentorship and other support from TRI.

The CBPR scholars - and TRI trainers - attending the final hybrid session in person were: (back, l-r): Ethan Bradford, Tiffany Haynes, Ph.D. (TRI Community Engagement Core director), Clare Brown, Ph.D., Claire Foster, M.D., Stephanie Lopez-Neyman, Ph.D., MPH, Jill Mhyre, M.D., and (front, l-r): Patricia "Pat" Savary, Nicki Spencer (TRI research program manager), Jordan Ford and Shakshi Sharma.

Not pictured: Emma Agnew, Cindy Arreola, Cari Bogulski, Ph.D., Ashley Clawson, Ph.D., Ben Hood, Neyleea Gonzalez, Cindy Lewis, Nithya Neelakantan, Ph.D., Patrick Rodgers, Rebecca Sartini, D.N.P., ChyChy Smith, Ashley Stone, Patrice Storey, Ph.D., Lindsey Thomas, Ph.D., Candace Williams, and Kazandra Wilson, Ed.D.

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