

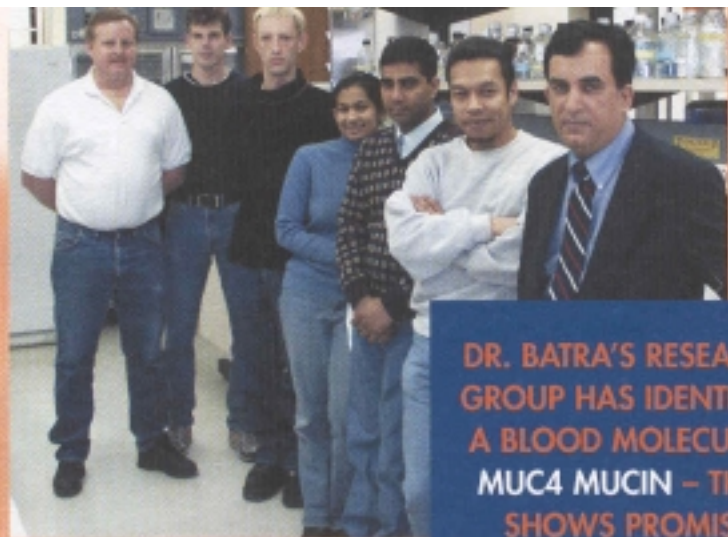
LOOKING FOR TIME

story and photo by Bill O'Neill

When a patient is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he or she usually has about six months to live. Surinder Batra, Ph.D., is working to change that bleak prognosis, and his latest research breakthrough may provide hope to patients who are afflicted with the disease.

Dr. Batra's research group has identified a blood molecule — MUC4 mucin — that shows promise as being the first marker specific to pancreatic cancer.

"Currently, there are no known markers (in the blood) specific to pancreatic cancer," said Dr. Batra, an associate professor in



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biochemistry and molecular biology. "Our trial showed that MUC4 is not only a marker for the cancer, but it also could be a molecule that we'd target in therapy."

Dr. Batra's research earned him the 2001 College of Medicine Joseph P. Gilmore Outstanding Investigator Award.

"Dr. Batra has made important contributions to cancer research," said Ira Fox, M.D., associate dean for research and development within the UNMC College of Medicine, "and he was selected for this award from a very competitive field."

Dr. Batra's research into the causes of pancreatic cancer began during his over eight-year tenure at Duke University Medical Center, NC.

He came to UNMC in 1996, he said, because of its strong program in pancreatic cancer, and the interaction that occurs between basic scientists and clinicians.

His lab group, consisting of between 10 and 14 members at any one time, is supported by various funding agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Department of Energy, the Nebraska Research Initiative program, the Nebraska Cancer and Smoking Disease Research Program, and private foundations.

During the past five years, Dr. Batra has written more than 30 published works, including research papers, review articles and book chapters. Nearly all of his efforts focus on pancreatic cancer, which accounts for 3 percent of total cancer types and 5 percent of all cancer deaths. About 28,000 people are diagnosed and die every year from the disease. Nearly all of them are diagnosed after the disease has metastasized, or spread, from the pancreas.

"People who are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer usually don't have long to live — usually from two months up to a year, at the longest," Dr. Batra said.

Dr. Batra is hopeful that identifying MUC4 will help change that. In the preliminary study, completed in January 2001, 105 patients with various cancers and disease were studied. Only those with pancreatic cancer exhibited expression of MUC4.

"This research is very promising, in that MUC4 could be not only a marker for pancreatic cancer, but also a target in its treatment," Dr. Batra said. "We are excited to study it further." d

Eagles Chapter Donates to Research

Losing Nancy Schroeder to pancreatic cancer was a blow to the Bellevue chapter of the Fraternal Order of Eagles and its auxiliary.

"She was the first past-president of the auxiliary to pass away," said Charlene Koch, who along with Schroeder was a charter member of the Bellevue chapter in 1980. "It was a little hard for us to lose her."

With heavy hearts, chapter leaders decided to apply for grants at the Eagles headquarters, based in Milwaukee, Wisc. The money was to be used for pancreatic cancer research at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Surinda Batra, Ph.D., would be the recipient.

"It was a shock to know what Nancy went through with her cancer. She was in a lot of pain for a long time," said Koch, currently the madam state president of the Eagles auxiliary. "We just felt that if in any way, this money could be put to use to save someone else from going through what Nancy went through — that maybe some research would

allow for earlier detection — then this would be money put to good use."

So, chapter members applied for a grant from the national headquarters. Along with that, they sent in \$1,200 of memorial money that would be credited to their chapter and then returned in full for research at UNMC. Schroeder's family decided that cancer research would be a destination of the memorials in her name. Her husband, Fred, also was a charter member of the Bellevue Eagles chapter, for which he also is a past-president.

But, when the check was passed to Dr. Batra at a state Eagles conference, the amount didn't read \$1,200. Instead, the national Eagles organization had kicked in a \$5,000 grant to make the final donation \$6,200.

Koch said UNMC is one of the local chapter's favorite recipients.

"So many people are affected by the presence of the Med Center," Koch said. "We just do what we can to give back and say thanks."