

SUMMER 2026

NeuroNExT

from the Departments of Neurological Sciences and Neurosurgery

A Summer of Progress and Possibility

Summer brings people together, and this issue of NeuroNExT reflects that spirit of connection. Across patient care, education, research, and service, we highlight the people and teams moving the Department of Neurological Sciences forward.

We open with a remarkable in-flight stroke emergency and the coordinated Nebraska Medicine response that helped save Fulton Washington's life and function. The issue also highlights clinical innovation in stroke rehabilitation, skull base surgery, CAR T-cell therapy research in Multiple Sclerosis, and new translational work across PTSD, tissue engineering, and functional neurosurgery.

We are proud to celebrate our 2026 graduates, welcome the new residents, fellows, and faculty and staff, and recognize colleagues whose accomplishments reflect excellence in care, education, research, safety, and service.

Thank you for staying connected with us. We are pleased to share these stories of progress, possibility, and impact.

Table of Contents

IN THIS ISSUE

In-flight Stroke Emergency: Swift Action Saves the Life of a Chicago Man	3
Neurological Sciences Fellows	4
2026 Graduates	4
New Residents & Fellows	5
New Faculty & Staff	6
Second Annual UNMC PTSD Symposium Highlights Multidisciplinary and Translational Approaches to PTSD	7
UNMC Neurological Sciences at AAN	8
Nebraska Medicine First in the State to Offer Breakthrough Therapy for Stroke	10
Pavelka Earns Back-to-Back 2026 Patients' Voice Awards	11
What You Need to Know About Skull Base Surgery	12
Great Plains IDeA-CTR Hosts Inaugural Conference on Tissue Engineering and Organoid Science	13
CAR T-Cell Therapy Research in Multiple Sclerosis	14
Thorell Wins the Robert S. Wigton Award	14
Neurosciences Team Attend the Association for Clinical and Translational Science Conference	16
Kavish Achieves Board Certification	17
Grants & Publications	18



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In-flight Stroke Emergency: Swift Action Saves the Life of a Chicago Man

Advancing Health, Spring 2026



Mithun Sattur, MD

Knowing the signs of a stroke and taking immediate action can be life-saving. For 54-year-old Fulton Washington of Chicago,

swift coordination by many people is why he is alive today.

On June 18, 2025, Fulton and his fiancée, Wakesha Herron, were on Southwest Airlines flight 3148 bound for Las Vegas to celebrate a friend's anniversary. During the flight, Wakesha noticed Fulton dropping things, sweating heavily and flicking his eyes. Although Fulton insisted he was alright, Wakesha saw his lip droop, knew something was wrong and alerted the flight attendant.

Five doctors happened to be on board and offered to assist. Using his smart watch, they took Fulton's pulse, examined him and suspected he was having a stroke.

Time was of the essence. Within 35 minutes, the plane made an emergency landing in Omaha, Nebraska, and paramedics rushed Fulton to the Nebraska Medicine neurovascular stroke unit.

Fulton was diagnosed with an acute-onset, middle cerebral artery (MCA) stroke along with a possible carotid artery dissection. This type of severe stroke is caused by a tear in the inner layer of a carotid artery in the neck that blocks or reduces blood flow to one of the brain's largest arteries. With two blockages, Fulton needed emergency surgery.

After clot-busting medication was administered, Mithun Sattur, MD, used neuroendovascular techniques to perform a mechanical thrombectomy – a procedure that removes a blood clot from a blood vessel in the brain – and placed several stents to help keep blood flowing. Although the surgery was complex and high risk, the team successfully removed the blood clots and stabilized the arteries. Fulton was transferred to the specialized neurocritical intensive care unit.

"The flight diversion to Omaha absolutely saved Fulton's life and function," says Dr. Sattur.

"It was a team effort, starting with his fiancée speaking up about his symptoms and the action of the flight crew, to Omaha emergency services, who were ready to transfer upon landing. Next, the Nebraska Medicine stroke neurology team took over, the neurosurgery team performed the procedure, and the neuro intensive care team along with the therapy teams aided in recovery. Everyone involved deserves credit for Fulton's successful outcome."

"For the first few days after surgery, Fulton didn't have feeling or movement on his left side," says Wakesha. "But we were all amazed that not only did that improve, but by day three, he was walking around on his own."

Fulton was released from the hospital one week later, on June 24. His doctors in Chicago were stunned when he walked in for his follow-up appointment, rather than arriving in a wheelchair. After a few weeks, he began physical therapy. At his three-month follow-up, scans showed full

recovery, and he was back at work in his construction job.

"Everyone at Nebraska Medicine was amazing," says Fulton. "From the time I woke up from anesthesia I received constant care – from bathing, getting fresh air and checking on me – they stayed on it every minute. I never had to ask for anything. Everyone was astonished at my progress. I wish I could fly down and say thank you to each team member in person."

If a remarkable recovery wasn't enough, Fulton married the love of his life on March 28.

"I just want to thank everyone involved," he adds. "From the plane to recovery, every single person did such a great job. Above all, I'm so thankful Wakesha was paying attention. She saved my life, and I'm so glad I get to spend the rest of my life with her."



Wakesha Herron and Fulton Washington

Neurological Sciences Fellows

MOVEMENT DISORDER FELLOW



Nicholas Edwards, MD

Virginia Commonwealth University

Hometown: Cottage Grove, Minnesota

Three interesting facts about me:

- I spent a month in Uganda during medical school and went whitewater rafting on the Nile River, nearly getting washed away by the rapids!
- I dabble in numismatics and have a growing collection of coins and currency from more than 60 countries.
- Off the clock, you will find me wandering in search of the best coffee and sweet treats around town.

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS FELLOW



Amro Abu Shanab, MD

Hometown: Jordan

Three interesting facts about me:

- My favorite meal is Mansaf
- I am married with one daughter
- I'm a big fan of Lord of the Rings movies

NEUROPSYCHOLOGY FELLOW



Tristan Benjamin, PhD

Hometown: Columbus, Indiana

Three interesting facts about me:

- I enjoy roller skating and trying tricks at skateparks
- I love all kinds of crafting including drawing, knitting, crochet, and repurposing old clothes
- I recently learned how to play the mandolin and I'm currently learning guitar

NEUROSURGERY RESIDENTS



Dr. Yamenah Ambreen

Dr. Yamenah Ambreen comes to us from The Ohio State University College of Medicine.

Yamenah's husband, Cole, also matched at UNMC and will be joining the UNMC Department of Orthopedic Surgery Residency Program.

Hometown: Chicago, Illinois

Three interesting facts about me:

- As a child, I also lived in Cleveland, Ohio and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

- My husband and I have a cat named Anika and she loves playing fetch.
- My favorite place in Omaha (so far) is Coneflower Creamery.



Dr. Juan Ruiz Rodriguez

Dr. Juan Ruiz Rodriguez graduated from the University of Puerto Rico School of Medicine.

Hometown: Arecibo, Puerto Rico

Three interesting facts about me:

- I studied physics at Princeton University. Under the mentorship of Christopher Tully and Alexander Polyakov, my research spanned cosmology, theoretical high-energy physics, particle detection, and machine learning.
- After Hurricane Maria devastated my island of Puerto Rico in 2017, I participated in medical relief efforts that delivered supplies and assistance to communities in need.
- I am an Eagle Scout and a lifelong outdoor enthusiast. I enjoy camping, hiking, and backpacking

2026 Graduates by Shari Griffin



The Graduates: Sheida Koohsari, MD, Joseph Benes, MD, Zaid Rikh Najdawi, MD, Valeria Parra Payano, MD, Hannah Maldonado, MD and Gabriella Rizzo, MD

Congratulations to all our 2026 graduates! Your hard work, dedication, and perseverance have culminated in this outstanding achievement.

The Department of Neurological Sciences proudly celebrated its graduating physicians during a special ceremony at Champions Run Pavilion in Omaha, Nebraska. To commemorate this milestone, each graduate received a personalized medical bag engraved with their name as a lasting reminder of their accomplishments.

The celebration was made even more memorable with the attendance of special guest UNMC Chancellor H. Dele Davies, MD, who joined graduates, faculty, family, and friends during the cocktail hour.

Congratulations to our graduates on this significant milestone. We wish you continued success and fulfillment as you embark on the next chapter of your medical career.

New Residents & Fellows

NEUROLOGICAL SCIENCES RESIDENTS



Heidi Bien, MD

Dr. Bien is from the University of South Dakota and Sanford School of Medicine.

Three interesting facts about me:

- I am an identical twin sister.
- I love camping and hiking, and my biggest accomplishment so far was summiting Mount Harvard, a 14,000-foot peak in Colorado.
- I love yoga and weightlifting.



Justin Britt, MD

Dr. Britt is from A.T. Still University of Health Sciences and Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Hometown: Richland, Missouri

Three interesting facts about me:

- I am a Missouri State Champion in Archery and Trap/Skeet
- I love to grill/BBQ
- I'm an avid trout fisherman



Davanté Hammer, MD

Dr. Hammer is from the University of Kansas School of Medicine in Wichita, Kansas

Hometown: Scandia, Kansas

Three interesting facts about me:

- I was on the Kansas State University Bass Fishing Team
- My graduation class in high school had 15 students
- I enjoy historical documentaries



Jensen May, MD

Dr. May is from Kansas City University College of Osteopathic Medicine in Kansas City, Missouri

Hometown: Topeka, Kansas

Three interesting facts about me:

- I love baking, especially breads and cakes
- I play sand volleyball and pickleball in my spare time
- I enjoy playing video games like Halo and Borderlands



Maryam Nadeem, MD

Dr. Nadeem is from Al Neelain University

Hometown: Khartoum, Sudan

Three interesting facts about me:

- I love baking
- I spent my childhood in Alabama
- My newest hobby is gardening



Isabella Ramirez Rojas, MD

Dr. Ramirez-Rojas is from the Universidad ICESI and Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud Columbia

Hometown: Cali, Colombia

Three interesting facts about me:

- I'm from Cali, Colombia, the salsa (dancing) capital of the world. Around there, learning salsa feels almost as mandatory as learning how to walk.
- I love creating healthy recipes from scratch and proudly call them my "experiments." Most

turn out delicious, some become family favorites, and a few teach me not what to combine.

- I've always been a caring and thoughtful person. In high school, my classmates nicknamed me "Mami Rami" (Mom-Rami) because I was always checking in on everyone, making sure they had eaten, were doing okay, and somehow remembered their homework.



Seth Springer, MD

Dr. Springer is from the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, Omaha, Nebraska

Hometown: Omaha, Nebraska

Three interesting facts about me:

- I have two kids.
- I have three dogs.
- I like to carve wood and fish when I have free time.

New Faculty & Staff



Nada Ahmed, MD, MBBS

Assistant Professor

Dr. Ahmed will be joining the Department of Neurological Sciences (DONS) as an assistant professor with a focus on Movement Disorders. She did her fellowship in Movement Disorders here at UNMC. Dr. Ahmed fell in love with movement disorders because of its emphasis on phenomenology-driven problem-solving, the engaging debates sparked by differing interpretations of movements, and having the privilege of working with a compassionate community of movement physicians who inspire her, all during such an exciting and evolving time in the field.

Three interesting facts about me:

- I was born in Germany.
- I love teaching my dog, Charlie, complex tricks. He can close doors, clean up his toys, and press the foot pedal to open the trash and throw things away... that is if he's properly compensated with treats!
- I love horror movies! I think that voluntarily scaring myself is somehow relaxing.



Maria Barbara Grimberg, MD

Assistant Professor

Dr. Grimberg joins the DONS after finishing her Epilepsy Fellowship at the University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center. She will be focused on epilepsy conditions. Dr. Grimberg fell in love with epilepsy because it's a treatable, and sometimes even curable, condition, which is uncommon in Neurology. Helping patients get better and regain control of their lives is incredibly fulfilling.

Three interesting facts about me:

- I'm an avid rollerblader and often go on two-hour skating sessions.
- I've played in a few bands over the years and still enjoy making music whenever I can, whether it's guitar, piano or just singing along.
- I'm a devoted animal lover and the go-to pet sitter for many friends.



Sedat Gül, MD

Assistant Professor

Dr. Gül comes to the Department of Neurological Sciences from Istanbul, Turkey where he will join the DONS as an assistant professor. His professional and medical interests include microenvironment and immunological changes in the brain after acute ischemic stroke.

Three interesting facts about me:

- I have lived in 16 different cities so far.
- I like reading about history and hope to create my own library.
- I follow soccer and try to watch Süper Lig and Premier League whenever I can.



Yashwanth Pulluru, MBBS

Assistant Professor

Dr. Pulluru, originally from Hyderabad, India, will join the Department of Neurological Sciences as an Assistant Professor, with a clinical and academic focus on epilepsy care and research. He was drawn to neurology by the intricate puzzle-like nature of the human brain. The sheer variety of clinical presentations means you are always

having to connect the dots between subtle symptoms and complex anatomy.

Three interesting facts about me:

- I am a former dual sport collegiate athlete in cricket and basketball.
- I am a massive F1 enthusiast, and I enjoy deep diving into team strategies and race data.
- I enjoy reading fiction novels, particularly anything written by Dan Brown.



Gabriella Rizzo, MD

Assistant Professor

Dr. Rizzo comes from Iowa City, Iowa and recently completed her residency at UNMC. She will join DONS as an assistant professor. She developed her interest in neurology while working with the UNMC's neurohospitalist teams as a third- and fourth-year medical student, where she saw how neurologists can make a meaningful difference in patients' lives.

Three interesting facts about me:

- I am an avid tomato gardener.
- I enjoy reading fiction.
- I can play the violin.

Second Annual UNMC PTSD Symposium Highlights

Multidisciplinary and Translational Approaches to PTSD

The second annual UNMC PTSD Symposium, The Faces of PTSD, brought together clinicians and researchers across neurological sciences, psychiatry, psychology, oncology, pediatrics, sleep medicine, pharmacy, and rehabilitation to examine post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) through a multidisciplinary and translational lens. The symposium highlighted themes relevant to NeuroNExT readers, including cross-disciplinary collaboration, real-world data, and clinically actionable research to improve outcomes in complex neurological and neuropsychiatric conditions.

Hosted on June 12 by the UNMC Department of Neurological Sciences in collaboration with Psychiatry and Psychology, the event convened approximately 140 participants through in-person attendance at the UNO Scott Conference Center and virtual participation. A central theme emerged early: PTSD does not have a single cause, presentation, or treatment pathway. It may arise following combat, violence, abuse, childhood adversity, critical illness, cancer, and other life-altering experiences, underscoring the need for flexible, context-sensitive approaches that bridge clinical care and research.

Speakers highlighted PTSD as a disorder involving neural systems related to threat detection, memory, emotional regulation, and autonomic function, as well as broader stress biology. This systems-level perspective supports the need to advance mechanistic understanding alongside pragmatic, patient-centered interventions.

Presentations examined PTSD across medical and developmental

contexts. Dr. Steve Phillips from Neurocritical Care discussed post-ICU syndrome and its implications for neurorecovery and long-term outcomes, while Dr. Adam Mills from the Buffett Cancer Center explored trauma across the cancer continuum. Nebraska Medicine anxiety experts Drs. Justin Weeks, Lauren Edwards, and Ryan Edwards addressed lifespan approaches to care, including scalable written

exposure therapy models, evidence-based pharmacologic strategies, and pediatric PTSD diagnosis and management. Dr. Zachman discussed the intersection of PTSD and substance use disorders, highlighting challenges relevant to real-world clinical populations often underrepresented in trials.

A featured presentation by Mr. Latona and Dr. Chang focused on objective sleep assessment in adults with PTSD, drawing on data from an ongoing double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of cannabidiol (CBD) for adults with PTSD (UNMC IRB #0159-22; NCT05269459; Dr. Matt Rizzo, PI). The CBD research was made possible with generous philanthropic support.

The presentation highlighted potential discrepancies between patient-reported sleep and wearable-derived metrics, illustrating the value of real-world, technology-enabled measurement approaches increasingly relevant to pragmatic clinical research networks.

Across sessions, participants engaged with practical strategies for addressing PTSD related to serious medical illness, life-altering diagnoses, and critical care experiences, including prescribing, behavioral therapies, comorbid substance use, sleep assessment, and pediatric care. The symposium was supported by the planning team and the UNMC Center for Continuing Education as an accredited activity.

A consistent message emerged across the day. Advancing PTSD care will require coordinated, team-based models that integrate neurobiology, lived experience, and real-world clinical data. The symposium underscored how multidisciplinary collaboration and translational research can accelerate progress toward more precise, scalable, and effective interventions for PTSD.



Matthew Rizzo, MD, FAAN, FANA talks to attendees about the effects of PTSD.

HARTMAN ACHIEVES FELLOW OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF NEUROLOGY

by Shari Griffin



Elizabeth Hartman, MD, FAAN

Elizabeth Hartman, MD, FAAN, has been elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology (FAAN), a distinction recognizing

her significant contributions to both the Academy and the broader neurology community. Her application was reviewed and approved by the Member Engagement Committee, reflecting her sustained commitment to advancing the field.

Fellowship in AAN represents one of the organization's highest honors and carries an ongoing commitment to professional excellence and service. Fellows are expected to embody the Academy's core values, including leadership, integrity, professionalism, respect, and a strong dedication to inclusion, diversity, equity, anti-racism, and social justice. They must also uphold the professional standards that earned them this distinction and adhere to the AAN's Code of Professional Conduct.

Congratulations to Dr. Hartman on this well-deserved recognition.

UNMC Neurological Sciences at AAN



The 2026 American Academy of Neurology Annual Meeting was held in April in Chicago, Illinois.

UNMC Neurological Sciences brought a broad and visible presence to the 2026 American Academy of Neurology Annual Meeting, held April 18–22 at McCormick Place in Chicago. More than 15 UNMC faculty members and residents were selected to present scientific abstracts, clinical case reports, educational sessions, and therapeutic updates, reflecting the department's growing culture of clinical scholarship, mentorship, and national engagement.

AAN is where clinical observations, emerging science, education, and workforce priorities come together to shape the future of neurology. UNMC's strong showing placed Nebraska in that national conversation not as a spectator, but as a contributor helping drive the field. Through resident-led scholarship, faculty mentorship, neurocritical care case discovery, dementia research, epilepsy and neuroimmunology work, general neurology education, and stroke prevention updates, the department showed how academic neurology in Nebraska is generating knowledge with relevance well beyond the region.

The department's work spanned neurocritical care, epilepsy, dementia, neuroimmunology, general neurology education, and stroke prevention. Several presentations grew directly from challenging clinical cases, showing how bedside observation can lead to scholarship and shared learning. Subin Mathew, MD, was involved in multiple resident-led neurocritical care projects, including work with Mathias Maisenbacher, MD, and Daryl Gress, MD, on microRNAs in neuroprognostication after cardiac arrest. He also mentored case reports on fulminant cerebral edema from occult hemorrhagic melanoma metastasis, hypercapnic cerebral edema resolved with noninvasive ventilation, and bupropion overdose presenting as a brain-death mimic with myoclonic seizures and full recovery after VA-ECMO and LVAD support.

Trainees had a particularly strong showing. Ola Alshaqi, MD, was a co-author on a systematic review of infertility therapy in patients with seizure disorders. Arenn Carlos, MD, presented across several areas, including a neurocritical care case report on rapidly progressive cerebral edema, a genetics poster on C9orf72 mutation mimicking early-onset Alzheimer's disease with prodromal photosensitive seizures, and a platform presentation on cerebrovascular reactivity as a potential screening and monitoring tool for amyloid-beta burden in Alzheimer's disease. Carlos was also recognized during the 2026 Trainee Award Recognition Ceremony.

UNMC faculty also contributed to national conversations on training, workforce, and therapeutics. Elizabeth Hartman, MD, participated in the Trainee Hub Panel, Neurology Compass, and joined Drs. Amy Hellman, Subin Mathew, and Steve Phillips for "Training General Neurologists: The University of Nebraska Experience." She also presented on sustaining general neurology practice, a timely issue as the demand for neurologic care continues to grow. Pierre Fayad, MD, participated in an industry therapeutic update on unmet needs in stroke prevention for patients with atrial fibrillation and secondary stroke, including emerging approaches to FXI and FXIIa inhibition. Lakshman N. Arcot Jayagopal, MD, presented a case report and literature review on autoimmune glial fibrillary acidic protein longitudinally extensive myelitis secondary to pembrolizumab, highlighting a rare immune-related neurologic complication of checkpoint inhibitor therapy.

The UNMC Neurology Alumni Dinner added another important dimension to the week. Faculty, residents,



Attendees at the UNMC Neurology Alumni Dinner in Chicago, Illinois.

alumni, and medical students gathered in downtown Chicago for an evening of conversation, mentorship, and connection. For current trainees, the dinner offered a chance to meet graduates of the program and see the professional community that extends well beyond residency and fellowship.

AAN 2026 highlighted the range and depth of work underway in UNMC Neurological Sciences. More importantly, it showed how Nebraska is helping drive the field by turning clinical experience into scholarship, giving trainees meaningful national exposure, strengthening faculty leadership, and building a neurology community that connects local care to national progress.



Steven Phillips, DO, Elizabeth Hartman, MD, Amy Hellman, MD and Subin Mathew, MD at AAN.

Nebraska Medicine First in the State to Offer Breakthrough Therapy for Stroke

by Taylor Wilson

MARK WILSON KNOWS FIRSTHAND HOW DIFFICULT STROKE RECOVERY CAN BE.

Four years ago, he woke up noticing something wasn't right with his left side. A stroke significantly impacted his arm, hand, leg, and foot. Years of rehab work with Nebraska Medicine occupational therapist Stacy Reichmuth followed.

Despite his hard work, like many stroke survivors, Wilson reached a point where progress slowed. Now as the first patient in Nebraska to receive the Vivistim implant, he's hoping to push past that plateau.

"I don't think I would like to be sitting here a year or two from now and not doing it," Wilson says.

One of his goals is simple but meaningful: return to the golf course.

"I golfed four or five times a week," he says. "That's the thing I miss terribly."

For years, stroke care has focused on one critical window: the moments immediately after a stroke occurs, when rapid treatment can minimize brain damage. But for many patients, recovery has long plateaued once that window closes.

Now, Nebraska Medicine is offering hope.

"This is just the most exciting thing that's probably happened to stroke rehab in years," says Reichmuth.

As the first health system in Nebraska to provide Vivistim, doctors and therapists are helping stroke survivors regain function, sometimes years after their stroke, by tapping into the brain's ability to rewire itself.

"This really is a big deal," says neurosurgeon Josue Avecillas-Chasin, MD. "Once a stroke is established and a patient is left with deficits, historically, we haven't had much to offer beyond rehabilitation. This changes that."

Vivistim is an implanted device that functions in tandem with the work being done by occupational therapists such as Reichmuth. It delivers mild stimulation to the vagus nerve, which is a key communication pathway to the brain. This happens when patients perform specific rehabilitation exercise.

The goal: enhance neuroplasticity, or the brain's ability to form new connections.

"The vagus nerve is like a highway to the brain," Dr. Avecillas-Chasin says. "About 80% of its fibers go directly there, so it's a very efficient route to activate the brain during therapy."

During therapy sessions, clinicians activate the device at key moments as patients perform targeted movements. Over time, this pairing helps reinforce new neural pathways, improving movement and function.

Reichmuth describes the effect as "fertilizer for the brain," helping accelerate recovery when paired with purposeful movement.

The therapy is designed for adults with ischemic stroke (a blocked artery type of stroke), which is the most common type. These patients continue to experience upper limb weakness or loss of function.

One of the most promising aspects: patients don't need to be newly diagnosed.

"There's no strict limit on how long ago the stroke occurred," Dr. Avecillas-Chasin said, "Even patients years out from their stroke may still benefit."

The device is about the size of a pacemaker and is implanted in the chest, with a lead connected to the vagus nerve in the neck.

The procedure typically takes three to four hours, followed by a short



Mark Wilson and Nebraska Medicine occupational therapist, Stacy Reichmuth.

recovery period before therapy begins.

Patients like Wilson then complete a structured rehabilitation program, often including multiple sessions per week. The device is activated during exercise, and they can also continue therapy at home using the device.

"The more patients engage in therapy, the more benefit we expect to see," Dr. Avecillas-Chasin says.

While technology is still relatively new, early data is encouraging.

Clinical trials suggest patients using the device alongside therapy can see improvements two to three times greater than just therapy alone. And benefits may extend beyond just arm function.

"These improvements aren't always isolated," Reichmuth says. "They can affect balance, walking, even mood."

As awareness grows, Nebraska Medicine expects demand to increase rapidly. In fact, multiple additional patients have already been referred for therapy since the first procedure.

For patients like Wilson, that momentum represents something powerful: renewed possibility. He says his two daughters, one of whom is an occupational therapist herself, are holding him accountable.

"She asked me all sorts of questions, and she thinks it's awesome," Wilson says of his daughter. "Both of them are really strict, and they'll become, I think, a little bit more watchful over me to make sure I'm doing things right."

WHO QUALIFIES FOR THE DEVICE?

- Are at least six months post-stroke
- Are adults (generally 22 or older)
- Have had an ischemic (clot-related) stroke
- Continue to have upper extremity impairment

Patients who would like a consultation can call **402-552-2464**.

Pavelka Earns Back-to-Back 2026 Patients' Voice Awards

by Shari Griffin



Julie Pavelka APRN-NP, FNP-BC

Julie Pavelka, APRN-NP, FNP-BC, has been named one of 66 Nebraska Medicine physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants to receive the 2026 Patients' Voice Award. This honor is based entirely on feedback from clinic patients who completed experience surveys in 2024 and 2025. Over that 24-month period—and with at least 30 responses—she achieved and maintained a perfect 5.0 rating.

Now in its second year, the Patients' Voice Award recognizes Julie for the second consecutive time, highlighting the consistency and impact of her patient-centered care. Among this year's recipients, she was also one of just 21 providers to receive more than 150 survey responses over the two-year span.

Each awardee will receive a certificate featuring a patient quote along with a commemorative lapel pin. Julie's dedication to building strong provider-patient relationships truly sets her apart, and we proudly congratulate her on this well-deserved recognition. Congratulations, Julie!



Dr. Hanul Lee, Dr. Corbin McCown, Dr. Hannah Safranek, Dr. Hannah Maldonado, Dr. Valeria Parra Payano, Dr. Zaid Najdawi, Dr. Sriharsha Ponna, Dr. Steven Phillips and Dr. Matthew Rizzo

RESIDENT RESEARCH DAY

The 10th annual Resident Research Day took place on Thursday, May 14, at the Davis Global Center iExcel building on the UNMC campus. The event featured eight poster presentations and three podium presentations by PGY-4 residents in an all-digital format. Congratulations to all our presenters!

What You Need to Know About Skull Base Surgery

Advancing Health June 3, 2026



Mithun Sattur, MD, Sam Pate, MD, Christina Barnes, MD, Dan Surdell, MD, and William Thorell, MD

Finding out you have a tumor or disease near the base of your skull can be frightening, especially when you hear terms like “complex” or “hard to reach.”

Nebraska Medicine has a team that was built for exactly these types of cases. Our team of neurosurgeons and The Skull Base Program is the only one in the region focused entirely on this part of the body.

“The skull base is a critical area that separates the structures inside the skull from the sinuses and ear,” explains Christie Barnes, MD, rhinologist and skull base surgeon.

Dr. Barnes says surgery traditionally has been considered challenging due to the difficult-to-reach nature of this location and the numerous critical nerves, blood vessels and brain structures surrounding it.

“Skull base surgeons are uniquely trained in fellowship to understand the anatomy of this area so that

diseases in this location are treated safely and effectively,” she says.

The Skull Base Program has earned a Multidisciplinary Team of Distinction award from the North American Skull Base Society. Only a select number of programs across the country have received this honor.

“We have a talented, dedicated group of skull base surgeons who have worked very hard to take our clinical center to the next level as recognized by the American Skull Base Society recognition as a Multidisciplinary Team of Distinction. I am proud to be a part of this team,” says Dr. William Thorell, Professor of Neurosurgery at UNMC and Chair of the Department of Neurosurgery.

CONDITIONS TREATED

The skull base team treats a range of tumors and other conditions, including:

- Brain fluid leaks into the ears and nose.

- Benign and cancerous tumors of the sinuses or ears.
- Benign and cancerous tumors of the head and neck region near the skull base.

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

As a rhinologist and skull base surgeon, Dr. Barnes is just one of many experts on the team of skull base specialists.

“We work closely with neurosurgeons, endocrinologists and specially trained medical and radiation oncologists to customize patient treatments,” Dr. Barnes says.

Patient cases are reviewed in both a multidisciplinary clinic and a tumor board. This means specialists from different fields meet to review each case and decide the best course of treatment.

MINIMALLY INVASIVE WHEN APPROPRIATE

When possible, the team works through the nose or other natural openings rather than making large cuts. Tiny cameras help them see clearly while protecting nearby tissue.

“We focus on treating these hard-to-reach conditions with the least invasive approach possible,” Dr. Barnes says. “Our goal is to help patients recover faster and feel better.”

For patients, this may mean:

- Shorter hospital stays.
- Less pain after surgery.
- Faster recovery times.
- Minimal visible scarring.
- Lower rates of surgical complications.
- Better preservation of neurological function.

When a more traditional approach is needed, the team uses the latest tools and monitoring to keep you as safe as possible.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT YOUR FIRST VISIT

You may need imaging tests before your first appointment. When you arrive, your care team will review your scans and health history. They will explain your condition clearly and walk you through your options. You will have time to ask all the questions you need.

WHY CHOOSE NEBRASKA MEDICINE?

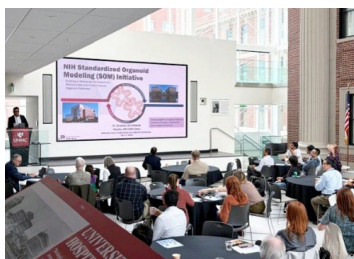
The Skull Base Program offers:

- Team-based, personalized care coordinated across multiple specialties.
- Advanced technology not available elsewhere in the region.
- Comprehensive management from diagnosis through recovery and rehabilitation.
- Access to clinical trials and innovative therapeutic approaches when appropriate.
- Outcomes that meet or exceed national benchmarks for complex skull base procedures.

If you have a skull base condition – or want a second opinion – our team is here to help. Schedule with a specialist by calling **800.922.0000**.

Great Plains IDeA-CTR Hosts Inaugural Conference on Tissue Engineering and Organoid Science

by Julie Halstead & Heather Braddock



Attendees at the Tissue Engineering and Organoid Science Conference.

More than 60 researchers, clinicians, and trainees from the University of Nebraska Medical Center, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, University of Nebraska Omaha, and Creighton University gathered on April 17 for the inaugural Nebraska Tissue Engineering and Organoid Conference, hosted by the Great Plains IDeA-CTR Network. The event showcased emerging technologies and collaborative research efforts

helping shape the future of precision medicine, drug discovery, and disease modeling, reflecting growing regional momentum around translational research and innovative biomedical technologies.

Keynote speaker Kevin Healy, PhD, professor of bioengineering and materials science at University of California, Berkeley, presented on New Approach Methodologies (NAMs), cutting-edge techniques designed to improve drug safety predictions, reduce reliance on animal testing, and expand opportunities for personalized therapeutic research. His presentation highlighted how rapidly evolving technologies are creating more accurate and human-relevant models for biomedical discovery.

Additional featured speaker Srivatsan Kidambi, PhD, director of the NIH Standardized Organoid Modeling Center, introduced the new SOM initiative, which connects resources across the NIH with federal agencies, academic institutions, and industry partners to accelerate collaboration and advance NAMs technologies for the broader scientific community.

Throughout the day, attendees heard presentations from investigators at UNMC and UNL who are using organoid biology and tissue engineering to study a wide range of diseases and disorders, including cancer research, reproductive health, and in vitro fertilization. The conference also featured lightning talks and an interactive poster session to encourage networking, collaboration, and the exchange of new ideas.

“This conference represents the kind of collaborative and forward-thinking science that will drive the next generation of medical discoveries,” said Howard Fox, MD, PhD, Co-Director of the Great Plains IDeA-CTR, who delivered the event’s opening remarks. “By bringing together researchers across disciplines and institutions, we are creating new opportunities to accelerate innovation and improve human health.”

CAR T-Cell Therapy Research in Multiple Sclerosis

by Maddie Pospisil, University of Nebraska Foundation



Lakshman Narain Arcot Jayagopal, MBBS, MD

In its May Pride of Place publication, the University of Nebraska Foundation featured a pioneering MS clinical trial that has given Beth Smith new hope. Donor support is helping turn groundbreaking CAR T-cell innovation into life-changing reality.

Beth Smith has been living with multiple sclerosis for 25 years, and she always believed there

had to be a better option for people diagnosed with this chronic disease. Smith remembers reading about

people across the world participating in new, innovative treatments for MS and thinking to herself, "What if that could be me?"

Late last year, that possibility became reality when Smith became the third person in the world to participate in a first-of-its-kind clinical trial for a new MS therapy.

INNOVATION THAT CHANGES LIVES

Led by Lakshman Narain Arcot Jayagopal, MBBS, MD, assistant professor in the UNMC Department of Neurological Sciences, the trial is supported by the Gene and Cellular Support Service led by Matthew Lunning, DO. Dr. Lunning, medical director of the Gene and Cellular Therapy Program and UNMC's assistant vice chancellor of clinical research, specializes in chimeric antigen receptor T-cell therapy, or CAR T-cell therapy. What makes this treatment remarkable is that it trains a person's body to fight its own disease.

UNMC and Nebraska Medicine have used CAR T-cell

Continued on page 15

Thorell Wins the Robert S. Wigton Award

Congratulations to William Thorell, MD, for winning the 2025-2026 Robert S. Wigton, MD, Most Valuable Program Director Award. This is a prestigious award given at the University of Nebraska Medical Center to recognize outstanding residency or fellowship directors for their significant contributions to graduate medical education (GME) and program leadership.

Winning the Most Valuable Program Director Award is a tremendous honor and a reflection of the strength of our residency program and the people who support it. Serving as a program director is both challenging and rewarding, requiring continuous effort to ensure that training programs remain highly compliant while fostering an environment where residents can thrive.

Navigating the complex and often byzantine ACGME requirements while maintaining an active clinical practice is no small task. This

recognition underscores our shared commitment to excellence in education, patient care, and program development.

"I am especially grateful for the mentorship and leadership of my predecessors, Dr. Leibrock and Dr. Follett, whose guidance helped

shape both the program and my approach to this role. This award truly reflects a team effort, and I am proud to be part of such a dedicated and high-performing group," says Dr. Thorell.

Congratulations to Dr. Thorell on this well-deserved award!



Erin Snow, Director of Graduate Medical Education, Dr. Chandra Are, Associate Dean for Graduate Medical Education and neurosurgeon & Chair Dr. William Thorell

therapy since the 2010s to treat patients with lymphoma and leukemia. Buoyed by that success, researchers began exploring new possibilities. UNMC was among the first institutions in the world to use CAR T-cell therapy in patients with autoimmune diseases such as lupus and multiple sclerosis.

The clinical trial Smith participated in used allogeneic CAR T-cell therapy, in which T cells from a healthy donor are genetically modified to target and destroy the harmful immune cells that drive autoimmune disease.

Since receiving the infusion of T cells, Smith has experienced changes that are “completely noticeable.” She can tap her toes on both feet — something she couldn’t do before. She remembers demonstrating the change for Dr. Lunning.

“I was sitting in my wheelchair, and Dr. Lunning came in and hopped up on the exam table. I tapped my toes, and he said, ‘Beth, can I record your toe tapping?’ And I said, ‘Absolutely.’

“It showed that he cares,” Smith said. “He wants what I want. He’s all in.”

SHORTENING THE DISTANCE FROM QUESTION TO ANSWER

Dr. Lunning is passionate about “breaking down barriers” so that researchers and clinicians can quickly bring their innovations to patients like Smith.

“As the medical director of the UNMC Clinical Research Center, I want to make research easy for people on our campus,” Dr. Lunning said. “I want to shorten the distance between question and answer.”

Philanthropy has been key in helping Dr. Lunning

achieve that goal. Dr. Lunning was recently named the inaugural holder of the James O. Armitage, MD, Chair in Hematological Malignancies at UNMC, which was created through the generosity of donors.

“Holding this chair is a great honor, and the support it provides is crucial for advancing gene and cellular therapy at UNMC and recruiting the next generation of world-class researchers and clinicians,” Dr. Lunning said. For Smith, the impact is deeply personal.

“To have this opportunity to support research and make a difference for everyone in the MS community has been life changing,” she said. “It continues to be one of the greatest experiences of my life.”

AIDAN’S ENDURING LEGACY

After losing their daughter Aidan to Burkitt Lymphoma at age 9, Rob and Sara O’Neil of Papillion established the Aidan O’Neil Foundation for the Prevention of Childhood Cancer.

Central to its mission was understanding the risk factors that contribute to causing the disease. Now, after 33 years, the O’Neils have chosen to sunset the foundation and transfer its \$4.2 million in assets to the University of Nebraska Foundation.

The O’Neils’ gift will create two endowed chairs at the NCI-designated Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center and establish the Aidan O’Neil Gene and Cellular Therapy Research Fund. Matthew Lunning, DO, assistant vice chancellor of clinical research at UNMC, said this gift will support advancements in CAR T-cell therapy by expanding infrastructure and research capabilities.

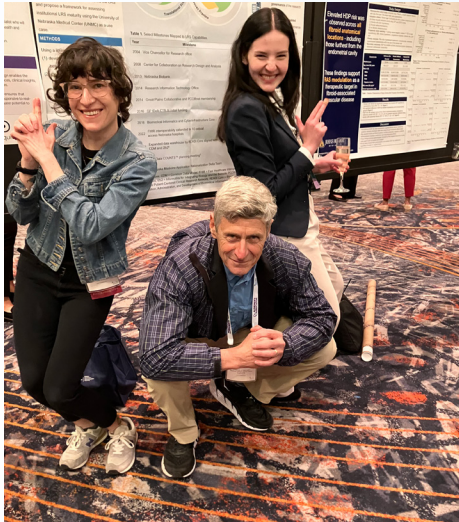
“This investment puts us in a position to discover new pathways to progress,” Dr. Lunning said, “by allowing us to be nimble as we look toward the future of gene and cellular therapy.”



NEUROSURGERY HOSTS THE J. JAY KEEGAN MEMORIAL LECTURE

On Friday, April 17, 2026, the Department of Neurosurgery hosted the 44th Annual J. Jay Keegan Memorial Lecture, featuring guest presenter Dr. Tyler Koski. Dr. Koski, Professor of Neurosurgery at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, shared his expertise with faculty, trainees, and guests during this longstanding annual lecture honoring the legacy of Dr. J. Jay Keegan. The evening concluded with a lovely dinner, providing an opportunity for attendees to continue conversations and connect with colleagues and the guest speaker.

Neurosciences Team Members Attend the Association for Clinical and Translational Science Conference



Carrie Bailey, PhD, Matthew Rizzo, MD and Laura Lienemann at the ACTS Conference

Several members of our team attended the Association for Clinical and Translational Science (ACTS) Conference in Milwaukee in April. This year's theme, "Building Trustworthy Translation: Rigor, Reproducibility, and Real-World Impact," closely aligned with our work in clinical and translational neuroscience. The meeting offered engaging sessions, opportunities to connect with colleagues from across the country, and updates on emerging AI applications, community outreach, population health, and precision health.

Our team, led by Dr. Carrie Bailey, presented work highlighting CTR

and data-driven initiatives in the Department of Neurological Sciences, including the use of multidimensional health data to build "digital twin" models of neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis. Laura Lienemann presented our concept of a Learning Research System, which applies learning health system principles to the research life cycle by making research operations measurable, reusable, governable, and continuously improvable across studies.

The conference also gave us time to strengthen team connections, including during a memorable return trip. After a canceled flight, we made an urgent Uber ride from Milwaukee to Chicago to catch another flight, which was also canceled. The unexpected detour became a memorable team-bonding experience and brought a productive conference to an unforgettable close.

CONGRATS TO THE NEUROSCIENCES UNIT 6

by Aimee Grindstaff



Neurosciences Unit 6 Team

Congratulations to the Neurosciences Unit for achieving gold medals in sharps blood exposures and other blood exposures, such as splashes and sprays of blood and body fluid.

As of today, more than 15 months have passed since their last sharps blood exposure and more than 22 months since their last splash/spray of blood or body fluid exposure.

"Employee safety has been a major goal for our unit this year," says Joseph Folkers, manager for acute care patient services. "We continue to practice all safety protocols in place and consistently reinforce this on a daily basis. Our team leads have been an integral part of success by coaching and reminding staff daily on all safety precautions."

A gold medal is awarded to those departments that have gone 12 or months in each area of exposure.

SAVE THE DATE

Parkinson's Disease Conference, September 30, 2026, at the Embassy Suites & Conference Center, La Vista, Nebraska

Lewy Body Dementia Conference, October 14, 2026, at the Scott Conference Center, Omaha, Nebraska

Frontotemporal Dementia Conference, November 7, 2026, at the Scott Conference Center, Omaha, Nebraska

Kavish Achieves Board Certification

by Pamela May Weeks, PhD, ABPP



Nick Kavish, PhD, ABPP

Dr. Kavish is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Neurological Sciences, Division of Neuropsychology. His clinical expertise includes neuro-oncology, oncology, and presurgical neuropsychological evaluations.

Board certification in clinical neuropsychology is a voluntary and rigorous process, comparable to board certification in medicine. Achieving board certification typically requires a minimum of 1.5 years and involves multiple steps, including credential review, a written examination, acceptance of work samples, and a comprehensive, multifaceted oral examination.

Becoming board certified signifies successful completion of an extensive peer review process conducted by external, board-certified clinical neuropsychologists to evaluate competency within the specialty. Although challenging, the process is highly rewarding and serves as an important mechanism for supporting lifelong learning and excellence in clinical practice.

Dr. Kavish noted, "I am grateful to all of my past supervisors and mentors, and my current colleagues, for their support throughout this process. Now that I've finished this chapter in my professional development, I am looking forward to future growth through clinical and academic collaboration with my neurosciences and hematology/oncology colleagues."



Josue Avecillas-Chasin, MD, PhD

AVECILLAS-CHASIN WINS ASSFN RESEARCH GRANT

Josue Avecillas-Chasin, MD, PhD won the American Society for Stereotactic and Functional Neurosurgery (ASSFN) research grant to study thalamic involvement in epilepsy. The grant has a duration of 2 years and will fund anatomical and clinical research in the realm of epilepsy. This grant will help better understand the role of the thalamus in seizure generalization and propagation but also will help to identify personalized neuromodulation targets in patients suffering from drug-resistant epilepsy.

Grants & Publications

GRANTS

Jieqiong Wang, PhD was awarded the Nebraska Research Initiative 1. This grant will support our efforts to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) to predict the risk of congenital heart disease in prenatal fetuses via ultrasound imaging

Nebraska Research Initiative 2. This grant will support our efforts to develop a multi-modal AI framework to characterize T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (T-ALL)

Daniel L. Murman, MD and Kuan-Hua Chen, MD received a 3-year grant award from the Alzheimer's Association (9/2025-8/2028, \$200,000) for grant titled "Influence of family connectedness on early AD progression."

Daniel L. Murman, MD received a contract award to participate in an international clinical trial titled the "Trontier Study" from Genentech, Inc (2/2026-2/2031, \$239,038). This study will investigate the efficacy and safety of trontinemab in subjects with prodromal to mild Alzheimer's disease.

Elizabeth Hartman, MD was awarded a PCORI grant to compare the effectiveness of three migraine preventive medications, atogepant (Qulipta), propranolol (Inderal) and topiramate (Topamax). The APT Comparison Study: A Comparative Effectiveness Study of Oral Medications Used for Migraine Prevention is currently enrolling. Please call Jana Ocken, RN, BSN at 402-552-2672 for more information.

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Emily Tiensvold

WAYS TO SUPPORT NEUROSCIENCES

These accomplishments depend on the shared commitment of our patients, families, faculty, staff, trainees, partners, and supporters.

We are committed to providing the best treatment available today, as well as pioneering new therapies for the future. Our team of internationally recognized physicians and researchers is dedicated to saving lives, relieving suffering and reducing the terrible impact of neurological disease on our patients, families and community.

Private donations play a critical role in advancing our state-of-the-art research, treatment, education, and patient care programs. Whether you would like to support patient care, research in a particular disease area, or the education of our next generation of doctors and scientists, your charitable gift can be directed to a project or topic that is most meaningful to you.

Gifts can be directed to any fund of your choice, or you can talk to Emily Tiensvold with the University of Nebraska Foundation about a donation to your area of special interest: emily.tiensvold@nufoundation.org



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If you have any news or upcoming events that you would like featured in the next edition of the *NeuroNExT UNMC* newsletter, please send the information to shgriffin@unmc.edu

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