

SPRING 2026

# NeuroNEXT

from the Departments of Neurological Sciences and Neurosurgery

## *Springing Into the Future:*

### *Advancing Neurology Through Innovation, Research, and Community Impact*

This spring, the Departments of Neurological Sciences and Neurosurgery continue to build with purpose across clinical care, research, education, and community engagement. In this issue, we highlight strategic planning to expand access to premier neurological care across Nebraska and the region, celebrate important achievements by our faculty and trainees, and share examples of the innovation, generosity, and service that continue to shape our mission.

A major theme is the strength and forward direction of our broader Neurosciences program. In "Neurosciences: A Strong Foundation for Growth," we describe an evidence-driven effort to prepare for new opportunities through Project Health and to strengthen access, coordination, and impact across our clinical enterprise. That work is grounded in multidisciplinary collaboration and increasingly informed by disease surveillance, learning health system principles, informatics, AI, and DataCOUNTs. At a time when neurological disorders remain a leading cause of disability nationally, these efforts matter deeply for Nebraska.

This issue also highlights the people who make that progress possible. We recognize Dr. Arenn Carlos, PGY-3 Neurology Resident, for two national honors from the American Academy of Neurology, and we celebrate the remarkable career and generosity of Dr. Bernd Fritsch, whose recent gift to support acquisition of a state-of-the-art confocal microscope will strengthen discovery across

UNMC. You will also find updates on The Faces of PTSD 2.0 symposium, ongoing migraine research through The APT Comparison Study, the upcoming arrival of Dr. Nada Ahmed in Movement Disorders, and a meaningful community diaper drive led by Benjamin Lamberty of the Howard Fox Lab.

Together, these stories reflect a department moving forward with energy, rigor, and commitment to the people and communities we serve.

***Happy reading!***

## Carlos wins Two Prestigious National Honors from AAN



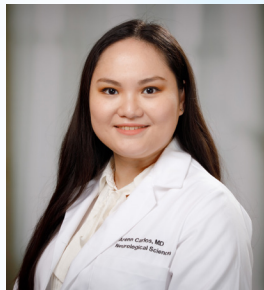
**Matthew Rizzo, MD, FAAN**  
*Frances and Edgar Reynolds  
Professor and Chair  
Department of Neurological  
Sciences*



**William Thorell, MD**  
*Professor of Neurosurgery  
at UNMC  
Chair of the Department of  
Neurosurgery*



**Howard Fox, MD, PhD**  
*Senior Associate Dean,  
Research and Development,  
College of Medicine  
Professor, Department of  
Neurological Sciences*



*Arenn Carlos, MD*

Dr. Arenn Carlos, PGY-3 Neurology Resident, has been selected for two prestigious national honors from the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) for 2026: the Resident Research Scholarship and the Resident Scholarship to the Annual Meeting. These awards recognize her commitment to both clinical excellence and the advancement of neurological research.

The AAN Resident Research Scholarship is a highly competitive \$5,000 grant awarded to only five residents across the U.S. and Canada each year. This award serves as a career "springboard" for promising clinician-scientists, providing the framework to conduct an original, year-long, mentored clinical research project. Dr. Carlos will use the grant for the project entitled "Cerebrovascular reactivity as a screening and monitoring tool for patients with Alzheimer's disease receiving anti-amyloid immunotherapy," which was designed under the mentorship of Dr. Daniel Murman. The study will aim to determine associations between transcranial doppler (TCD) ultrasound-derived measures of cerebrovascular reactivity and amyloid-beta burden in patients with Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore, it will investigate whether these measures are able to track longitudinal changes in amyloid-beta burden among patients receiving anti-amyloid immunotherapy. This research was selected for its potential to provide high-impact clinical insights and its contribution to the field of Behavioral Neurology. Dr. Carlos will present a formal overview of the project during the dedicated Resident Research Scholarship Showcase session at the 2026 AAN Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL this April.

In addition, Dr. Carlos was selected for the AAN Resident Scholarship to the Annual Meeting. Nominated with the dedicated support of Program Director, Dr. Steven Phillips, this award recognizes residents who have demonstrated a strong commitment to neurology and provides comprehensive travel support—including airfare, lodging, and registration—to attend the world's largest gathering of neurology professionals. This award also confers a unique leadership responsibility, as Dr. Carlos will act as a peer mentor to medical students attending the meeting on AAN scholarships, fostering a supportive community for future leaders in the field.

Dr. Carlos will also present two additional research posters during the AAN Annual Meeting, developed under the mentorship of Dr. Daniel Murman and Dr. Subin Mathew. Notably, one of these abstracts has been selected for a Session Poster Tour – a distinction reserved for top-tier, high-impact research where subject matter experts lead guided discussions for meeting attendees.

# The Faces of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

by Matthew Rizzo, MD, FAAN, FANA and Brigette Soltis-Vaughan, MSN

The UNMC Department of Neurological Sciences and the Mind & Brain Health Lab will host the Second Annual PTSD Symposium on June 12, 2026. This year's symposium, "The Faces of PTSD," will examine the many ways trauma affects individuals throughout one's life and across clinical settings, with emphasis on the human experience of PTSD and the science needed to improve care.

Bringing together faculty from Neurological Sciences, Psychiatry, and Psychology, the program will highlight current advances in the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD, including trauma after critical illness, cancer-related PTSD, substance use and comorbid PTSD, medication management, psychotherapy, pediatric and adolescent PTSD, and emerging findings on sleep disturbance from clinical and real-world data.

This full-day symposium reflects UNMC's commitment to advancing compassionate, evidence-based care and meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration on one of the most pressing behavioral health challenges of our time. Supported through a generous award from a donor foundation, the event will be offered in both in-person and virtual formats. Continuing education credit will be available for physicians, nurses, psychologists, and therapists.

## SAVE THE DATE

- **The Faces of PTSD Symposium**  
Friday, June 12, 2026 at Scott Conference Center, Omaha, Nebraska
- **Big 10 Neurosciences Conference**  
July 16, 2026 at Scott Conference Center, Omaha, Nebraska
- **Parkinson's Disease Conference**  
Wednesday, September 30, 2026 at Embassy Suites, La Vista, Nebraska
- **Lewy Body Dementia Conference**  
Wednesday, October 14th, 2026 at Scott Conference Center, Omaha, Nebraska



The Faces of PTSD



Zaid Najdawi, MD

## NAJDAWI WINS PROVIDER OF THE QUARTER

Congratulations to Dr. Zaid Najdawi who was chosen as the Nebraska Medicine Neurosciences Unit Provider of the Quarter. Dr. Najdawi was nominated and awarded this by nurses and staff of the unit, aka “6 Neuro” for his excellence in patient care, communication and education.

### **Way to go!**

# Vessell Joins Neurological Sciences to Advance Pediatric Neurosurgery



Meena Vessell, MD

Meena Vessell, MD, has joined the Department of Neurological Surgery as an Assistant Professor of Neurosurgery. A native of Cincinnati, Ohio, Dr. Vessell was born and raised in the Midwest. She completed her neurosurgery residency at the University of Louisville, where she became the first woman to graduate from the program in nearly 30 years.

Dr. Vessell is dual fellowship-trained in epilepsy surgery and pediatric neurosurgery and previously served on the faculty at Texas Children’s Hospital. In 2025, she was recognized as a “Top Doc” by Austin Monthly Magazine. Her surgical outcomes have been featured in the Austin American-Statesman newspaper, and she previously received the Excellence in Medicine Award from the American Medical Association.

At Children’s Nebraska, Dr. Vessell serves as Director of Pediatric Neurotrauma, Co-Director of Fetal Neurosurgery, and Assistant Director of Pediatric Epilepsy Surgery.

Her research focuses on the brain–gut axis and its modulation through surgically implanted vagus nerve stimulator devices. She has received industry-sponsored grant funding for this work and currently leads an active multicenter clinical trial.

A dedicated educator, Dr. Vessell is passionate about resident training and mentorship. Nationally, she serves in multiple leadership and teaching roles, including Co-Chair of the Congress of State Neurosurgical Societies Workforce Committee, Co-Chair of the

American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) Pediatric Section Coding and Reimbursement Committee, and faculty for the AANS Pediatric Neurosurgery Coding Course.

# Researchers study the effects of CBD on PTSD Symptoms

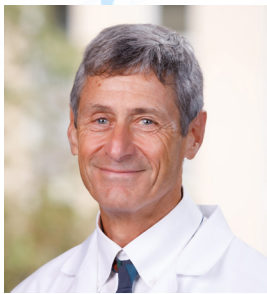
## ADVANCING HEALTH – WINTER 2026

A research study is examining whether cannabidiol (CBD) therapy may help adults with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Some people develop PTSD after life-threatening events. These can include natural disasters, violence, accidents or severe illness. The condition can lead to:

- Depression.
- Anxiety.
- Sleep disturbance.
- Emotional withdrawal.
- Self-harm.
- Loss of quality of life.

PTSD affects many Nebraskans. They include military veterans, domestic violence and sexual assault survivors, human trafficking victims and others.



Matthew Rizzo, MD, FAAN, FANA

hope the CBD study will provide valuable insights.

“We are committed to advancing care for those living with PTSD,” says neurologist Matthew Rizzo, MD. Dr. Rizzo is the study’s principal investigator.

The study brings together experts from several departments. These include Neurology, Psychiatry, Psychology, Pharmacy, Nursing and Public Health.

“Our interdisciplinary team reflects that PTSD is both brain-based and a lived experience,” Dr. Rizzo says. “It requires coordinated, compassionate and scientifically informed care.”

## HOW IT WORKS

The study compares the CBD Nanteia ATL5 with an inactive substance over eight weeks. The Phase II double-blind study is halfway complete.

Participants wear Fitbit devices. These track sleep and activity patterns. This data shows how PTSD affects daily life. Researchers also analyze brain imaging data to better understand how trauma affects the brain.

“The data are building a clearer picture of how PTSD shapes the nervous system over time,” Dr. Rizzo says.

The study compares people with PTSD to participants without PTSD during the first few weeks. Then, participants with PTSD receive either CBD or an inactive substance for the remainder of the study.

To join, participants must have a PTSD diagnosis. They need to receive mental health treatment for four weeks before joining. This includes keeping medications and therapy unchanged.

The research team checks safety at every visit through lab testing and suicide risk screening. After eight weeks, participants stop taking the

study medication. Researchers conduct follow-up safety assessments one week later.

## AN ONGOING COMMITMENT

In June 2025, the UNMC Department of Neurological Sciences hosted a PTSD symposium. It brought together clinicians, scientists, public health experts, and community partners.

“Our discussions highlighted that PTSD is a condition held in both the brain and the body,” Brigette Vaughan, APRN-NP, a research team member. “Effective treatment must support neurobiology, emotional processing, daily function and community connection.”

The symposium explored new experiential therapies under study. These include CBD, psilocybin and MDMA. Researchers believe these therapies may help change brain patterns related to trauma.

“Through clinical research, care and community partnerships, we are opening new paths to healing,” Vaughan says. “For people across the state, this work represents progress, compassion and hope.

If you have questions about the CBD therapy study, email Brigette Vaughan at or call 402-559-6239.

Our 2026 PTSD Symposium will be held on Friday, June 12th at The UNO Scott Conference Center. If you are interested in attending, go to: <https://go.unmc.edu/zkr7>

SCAN THE QR CODE TODAY



# The APT Comparison Study: Advancing Migraine Prevention Through Head-to-Head Research

Migraine is a complex and often debilitating neurological condition affecting millions of people worldwide. While several oral medications are available for prevention, clinicians and patients frequently face uncertainty when choosing between options due to limited direct comparison data. The APT Comparison Study aims to address this gap by evaluating the real-world effectiveness of three commonly used preventive treatments.

## STUDY OVERVIEW AND OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of the APT Comparison Study is to compare the effectiveness of atogepant against two established migraine preventive medications: propranolol and topiramate. By conducting a head-to-head comparison, researchers hope to generate meaningful data that can guide treatment decisions and improve patient outcomes.

Beyond effectiveness, the study also seeks to evaluate treatment persistence—how well patients are able to stay on their assigned medication over time. This is an important consideration, as tolerability and adherence often influence long-term success in migraine management.

## WHY THIS STUDY MATTERS

Currently, clinicians often rely on indirect comparisons, clinical experience, or trial-and-error when selecting preventive therapies. The APT Comparison Study is designed to provide direct comparative evidence, which could significantly impact how these medications are sequenced and prescribed in clinical practice.

## The findings may help answer key questions such as:

- Which medication is most effective at reducing migraine frequency?
- Which treatments are best tolerated over time?
- How do newer therapies like atogepant compare to traditional options?

## WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

The study is enrolling adults between the ages of 18 and 70 who have a confirmed history of migraine. Eligible participants must:

- Experience at least four moderate-to-severe headache days per month
- Have had migraines for at least one year
- Have experienced migraine onset before age 50

Participants may include individuals with migraine with aura, migraine without aura, or chronic migraine. Those already on preventive therapy may continue their medication, provided the dose remains stable during the first 16 weeks of the study.

## However, certain individuals are excluded, including those who:

- Have previously used atogepant, propranolol, or topiramate
- Are currently using CGRP-targeting therapies or beta-blockers
- Have specific migraine subtypes (such as hemiplegic migraine or migraine with brainstem aura)
- Have significant liver, kidney, or neurological conditions such as epilepsy

## STUDY DESIGN AND SCALE

The APT Comparison Study is a large, multi-site effort aiming to enroll 1,335 participants across 45 sites. This broad enrollment helps ensure that the findings are robust and applicable to a diverse patient population.

## MEASURING SUCCESS: THE PRIMARY ENDPOINT

The study defines a “treatment responder” using a two-part criterion:

1. The participant must complete the first 12 weeks on their assigned medication without discontinuing for any reason.
2. The participant must achieve at least a 50% reduction in moderate-to-severe headache days during weeks 9–12 compared to the four weeks prior to starting treatment.

This combined endpoint reflects both effectiveness and tolerability, offering a more comprehensive measure of treatment success.

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## LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

The study is coordinated by leading institutions:

- Clinical Coordinating Center: Mayo Clinic Arizona
- Dr. Todd Schwedt
- Dr. Juliana VanderPluym
- Data Coordinating Center: University of Iowa
- Dr. Chris Coffey
- Dixie Ecklund, RN, MSN, MBA

This collaborative approach ensures rigorous study design, data collection, and analysis.

## FUNDING AND SUPPORT

The APT Comparison Study is funded by the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) under contract number MI-2023C2-33021. PCORI's support underscores the study's focus on generating evidence that directly benefits patients and informs real-world healthcare decisions.

## LOOKING AHEAD

As migraine treatment continues to evolve, studies like the APT Comparison Study play a critical role in shaping evidence-based care. By directly comparing commonly used preventive medications, this research has the potential to simplify decision-making, improve treatment outcomes, and ultimately enhance quality of life for people living with migraine.

# Venous sinus stenting shows promising neuropsychological improvements in patients with medically refractory Idiopathic Intracranial Hypertension

by Corbin McCown, PhD and Vaishali Phatak, PhD



Corbin McCown, PhD

A research collaboration with Dr. Nicholas Borg (Neurosurgery) and Drs. Corbin McCown and Vaishali Phatak (Neuropsychology) at UNMC is addressing an underexplored question on the cognitive benefits of venous sinus stenting (VSS) for patients with idiopathic intracranial hypertension (IIH).

Headaches, visual disturbance, and tinnitus are frequently reported symptoms of IIH and have garnered much of the focus in evaluating surgical outcomes. However, cognitive symptoms are also frequently reported by patients with IIH and historically received limited systematic study.

The research project represents an early effort to quantify both subjective and objective cognitive outcomes associated with VSS.



Vaishali Phatak, PhD

In our prospective case series, subjective cognitive concerns were highly prevalent, endorsed by 86% of participants, and were correlated with perceived stress, highlighting the intertwined cognitive and psychosocial burden of IIH. Following VSS, participants showed most noticeable improvements in attention. Additional trending improvements in memory, executive functioning, perceived stress, sleep disturbance, and perceived cognitive difficulties were also observed. This holds promise for broader cognitive and psychological improvements that may emerge more clearly with larger samples.

Although this study is in a preliminary phase, these findings provide early evidence that venous sinus stenting may have meaningful cognitive and psychological benefits and reinforce the importance of incorporating cognitive evaluation into the pre- and post-operative care of patients with IIH. As this study grows in sample size, we hope to better clarify the trajectory and mechanisms of cognitive change following VSS, advancing patient-centered outcomes in this evolving field.

This work will be presented at the International Neuropsychological Society's Mid-Year Meeting in July in Dublin, Ireland, providing an opportunity to share these preliminary findings with an international audience of clinicians and researchers.

# CoNDA Center Hosts Annual Colloquium at UNMC

by Kendall Panas

The CoNDA Center held its Annual Colloquium on Wednesday, April 1st, 2026, bringing together neuroscience researchers from the Omaha region at UNMC's Durham Research Center Auditorium for a morning of robust programming.

The event featured presentations from four CoNDA Center-supported researchers. Dr. Christopher Kovach (Neurosurgery, UNMC) opened with his work investigating the role of attention in the perceptual and cognitive consequences of Parkinson's Disease. Dr. Matthew Van Hook (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, UNMC) followed with findings on how amyloid and tau pathology affect visual brain regions; research with significant implications for Alzheimer's disease. Dr. Carlos Fernández-Peña (Neurological Sciences, UNMC) then presented a molecular and neural dissection of the C1-PAG circuit and its role in anxiety-related behaviors. Rounding out the morning was Dr. David Warren, CoNDA's Associate Director, who introduced the "PRANK-Generations" Study, a multimodal, multigenerational

investigation into polygenic Alzheimer's disease risk and its effects on brain, cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral outcomes across the lifespan.

A lively poster session in the DRC1 lobby followed the mornings' oral presentations, featuring presenters from a variety of disciplines from UNMC, Creighton University, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Keynote speaker Dr. Thomas Kilduff, Director of the Center for Neuroscience at SRI International, delivered a talk on the hypothalamic hypocretin/orexin system as a therapeutic target for sleep disorders and addiction. A co-discoverer of the hypocretin/orexin neuropeptide system, Dr. Kilduff's presentation explored the physiological consequences of hypocretin neuron degeneration and its relevance for narcolepsy and other hypersomnolence disorders.

The event concluded with an award ceremony; a CoNDA TIBA Core Usage Voucher was presented to Graduate Research Assistant and PhD student Micah Summerlin of Dr. Aditya Bade's lab for her poster titled "Long-Acting Antiretroviral Formulations Restore The Fetal Neurometabolome."

We thank the CoNDA Community for attending and making our annual Colloquium a success. Looking forward to seeing you all next year!



*Presentations for the Annual Colloquium.*

# From Trainee to Team Member: Why I Stayed at UNMC

by Nada Ahmed, MBBS



Nada Ahmed, MBBS

Although I'm not originally from Nebraska, coming here felt like a natural next step after completing my residency training in South Carolina. During that time, I developed a strong interest in movement disorders and wanted a fellowship that offered both rigorous clinical training and a supportive academic environment. I had also heard excellent things about UNMC from a former trainee, which made the decision an easy one.

My fellowship experience at UNMC truly lived up to those expectations. What stood out most was the patient population, which gave me a deep appreciation for the distinctiveness of Midwestern culture. Patients here are resilient, kind, and remarkably grounded. Their sincerity and engagement in their care make clinical work especially meaningful and have influenced the way I practice medicine and the physician I strive to become.

The academic environment has been an equally strong fit. The neurology department genuinely values teaching, fostering a culture where working with learners is embraced and education is seen as a shared priority.

Above all, it's the people who made the greatest impact. The physicians in my division have cultivated a culture that is supportive, collaborative, forward-thinking, and enthusiastic. It's an environment that makes learning and collaboration both natural and rewarding.

Outside of work, Omaha has also been a great personal fit. I appreciate its manageable size and pace—it offers a sense of balance while still providing everything I need. And coming from the Northeast, the colder weather feels familiar.

I initially came to UNMC for fellowship training, but over time it became clear that this is a place I'm proud to call home and where I can begin building my career.

*Dr. Ahmed will start her services in July of 2026.*



Subin Mathew, MD, MBBS, FAAN

## SUBIN MATHEW NAMED 3RD NEBRASKA NEUROLOGICAL SOCIETY PRESIDENT

by Shari Griffin

Subin Mathew, MD, MBBS, FAAN has been elected as the third President of the Nebraska Neurological Society (NNS), marking a significant step in his leadership within Nebraska's neurology community. The Nebraska Neurological Society plays a key role in supporting neurologists through education, advocacy, and professional collaboration, bringing together both private practitioners and academic faculty across the state.

Dr. Mathew said, "The NNS plays a key role for neurologists across Nebraska, fostering collaboration in education and research while providing a unified voice for neurologists, neuro nurses, and PT/OT professionals in advocacy efforts." He also highlighted the value of the society's dedicated members and annual meetings in strengthening professional connections and collaboration.

# A Legacy of Giving: Welcoming New Life Through Community Support

by Benjamin and Elizabeth Lamberty

The Department of Neurological Sciences is always proud to support and participate in meaningful community events—and on March 27–28, one such celebration brought colleagues together for a great cause. Benjamin Lamberty, a researcher in the Howard Fox Lab, and his wife, Elizabeth, hosted a Diaper Drive, combining community, generosity, and celebration. Benjamin shared a few words on what inspired them to host this special event.

My wife Elizabeth and I chose to organize a diaper drive this year in support of Lydia House as we prepare to welcome our first child. Becoming parents a little later in life gave us an opportunity to reflect on the example set by my own parents and the importance they placed on helping others whenever possible. Organizing a small fundraiser felt like a meaningful way to honor that legacy while beginning a new chapter in our own family.

My mother, Elaine Lamberty, was a kindergarten teacher for more than 30 years. She believed strongly that helping others was simply part of what we are meant to do in life. If families were struggling, she quietly made sure children had school supplies and what they needed to succeed. After retiring following the birth of her first grandchild, she continued serving the community by volunteering at Lydia House at least once a week for over a decade, remaining involved until my father passed away.

My father, Larry Lamberty, was an Emergency Physician at the University of Nebraska Medical

Center who shared the same philosophy. If a patient told him they could not afford a prescribed antibiotic, he would often go to his locker and cover the cost himself. Eventually, pharmacists on campus recognized what he was doing and helped establish a fund to support patients who needed assistance paying for essential medications. Outside the hospital, he also supported community toy drives through Open Door Mission. Each year he would quietly purchase carts full of toys to donate—always declining recognition and reminding me that charity is about helping others, not being seen doing it.

Elizabeth and I hope to pass that same perspective on to our son.

In fact, his first charitable event happened before he was even born. As he grows older, we plan to involve him directly starting with choosing a toy each year to donate during the holidays.

The diaper drive itself was a success, collecting more than 3,000 diapers, 4,000 wipes, along with rash creams, clothing, and hygiene supplies for Lydia House families. One especially memorable part of the event was that many attendees declined the complimentary drink tickets we offered, saying they were happy to support the cause on their own. To me, that moment captured something important: people don't need incentives to be generous; they simply need the opportunity.



*The collection of diapers and wipes for the Lydia House in Omaha, Nebraska.*

# Symposium on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

by Padmashri Ragunathan, PhD



*Padmashri Ragunathan, PhD*

An estimated 10% of pregnancies worldwide are exposed to alcohol, a teratogen that can lead to a range of physical, cognitive, and behavioral impairments collectively known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD). While several studies indicate that individuals with FASD have sensory and multisensory deficits, it has only recently been recognized in this population that sensory processing problems can contribute to difficulties with motor, executive

functioning and cognitive performance and impact academic performance, adaptive behaviors, social skills, and interactions.

Dr. Padmashri Ragunathan from Neurological Sciences and Dr. Julia Stephen from The Mind Research Network are organizing a symposium titled 'Understanding Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and Sensory Processing: Preclinical and Clinical Implications' at the Research Society on Alcohol (RSA) meeting that will be held in June at San Antonio, Texas. The symposium will bring together preclinical and clinical researchers who will present and discuss their findings on sensory processing in FASD from animal and human studies using multiple approaches. Animal models of developmental alcohol exposure play an important role in understanding the mechanisms into how sensory systems become atypical and may offer a translational bridge to evaluate the underlying mechanisms for multisensory function.

Clinical studies provide crucial opportunities to understand how sensory function influences cognition, behavior, and daily function. The overall goal of this symposium is to present evidence on the impact of alcohol ranging from individual neurons to complex human behavior. Sensory profiles observed in individuals with FASD and the potential for animal models to reveal the neural mechanisms underlying these sensory deficits will be discussed



*Pamela May-Weeks, PhD, ABPP*

## DRS. MAY-WEEKS, BARES, AND FOX RECOGNIZED FOR ADVANCING ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH

Pamela May-Weeks, PhD, ABPP, Associate Professor in UNMC's Department of Neurological Sciences, Division of Neuropsychology, will receive the 2026 Vada Kinman Oldfield Award for research in Alzheimer's Disease, along with Sara Hurtado Bares, MD, Associate Professor in UNMC's Department of Internal Medicine, Division of Infectious Diseases. Their research project was developed along with Howard Fox, MD, PhD, Professor in UNMC's Department of Neurological Sciences. The award will be presented at a ceremony on April 29th from 11 a.m. to noon in the Wigton Heritage Center Atrium. The award, established by Barney Oldfield and named for his wife, Vada Kinman Oldfield, is given annually to an UNMC investigator who has conceived promising new ideas in Alzheimer's research. Drs. May-Weeks, Bares, Fox, and team are extremely honored to receive the funding accompanying the award to advance knowledge and clinical care for older adults.

# Neurosciences: A Strong Foundation for Growth

As part of strategic planning in anticipation of new opportunities through Project Health and a broader effort to expand access to premier neurological care across the region, our Neurosciences program continues to build from a position of real strength. This work has been supported by a comprehensive effort from a highly capable team, bringing together operational, clinical, strategy, finance, outreach, and marketing perspectives to help shape a thoughtful plan. With broad subspecialty depth, strong multidisciplinary collaboration, and one of the region's most comprehensive neuroscience teams, the program offers high-level expertise across neurology, neurosurgery, neurocritical care, stroke, epilepsy, pain, movement disorders, and brain tumor care. That strength is amplified by close collaboration with PM&R, pain medicine, radiology, pathology, oncology, ENT, and many other partners whose expertise helps support comprehensive, coordinated care. This breadth supports excellent patient care while reinforcing our role as a major referral destination and academic leader across Nebraska and the surrounding region.

The need for this work is substantial. A 2026 JAMA Neurology analysis of US Burden of Disease 2021 data found that disorders affecting nervous system health impacted 180.3 million people in the United States in 2021 and represented the leading cause of disability, accounting for 16.6 million disability-adjusted life-years. The most prevalent conditions included

tension-type headache, migraine, and diabetic neuropathy, while the conditions contributing the greatest collective disability were stroke, Alzheimer disease and other dementias, diabetic neuropathy, and migraine. The report also emphasizes that neurological burden spans the life course, from perinatal and neurodevelopmental conditions to epilepsy, headache disorders, stroke, neurodegenerative disease, and the neurological consequences of systemic illnesses such as diabetes.

Our efforts in Nebraska are designed to respond directly to this reality. They are evidence-driven and informed by the latest disease surveillance, helping us focus on our planning, expand access strategically, and deliver care to the patients and communities who need it most. In Nebraska, our Neurosciences program is helping address this national burden locally and regionally through coordinated, high-level care for many of these same disorders. Our work in neurology and neurosurgery, including stroke, dementia and cognitive disorders, epilepsy, movement disorders, neurocritical care, and broader general neurology, underscores that neurological disease is not a niche problem, but a major source of disability and health loss affecting patients and families across our state. As the state's largest neurology training site and the home

of Nebraska's only neurosurgery residency program, Neurosciences also plays a central role in preparing the future workforce needed to meet these challenges.

We are also using the most modern approaches to clinical care, system design, and improvement. Our efforts are aligned with learning health system principles and supported by informatics, data infrastructure, and emerging AI-enabled approaches that help connect care delivery, operational insight, research, and continuous improvement. This work is also consistent with the National Institute of Health's DataCOUNTs framework, emphasizing disciplined use of data to guide decisions, monitor performance, support discovery, and strengthen coordination across patients, programs, and populations.

The program is well positioned for continued growth. Strategic opportunities in general neurology, neurosurgery, regional partnerships, virtual care, remote monitoring, and evolving multidisciplinary models can improve access, strengthen coordination, and extend high-quality neuroscience services to more patients and communities. Together, these strengths position Neurosciences for continued impact through clinical excellence, innovation, collaboration, and regional leadership.





## 2026 Big Ten Neuroscience Annual Meeting: Data-Driven Innovation and Neuro-Translation

# BIG

by Kendall Panas

The University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) is proud to host the 2026 Big Ten Neuroscience Annual Meeting: Data-Driven Innovation and Neuro-Translation on Thursday, July 16th at UNO's Scott Conference Center, bringing together some of the brightest minds in neuroscience research for a dynamic day of discovery, collaboration, and professional development.

This year's meeting centers on the theme "Strengthening Neuroscience Research Across the Big Ten," uniting graduate students, postdoctoral trainees, faculty researchers, and clinicians from Big Ten universities alongside members of Omaha's vibrant academic and biomedical community, including colleagues from Children's Hospital,

Creighton University, and Boys Town National Research Hospital.

The conference will feature keynote addresses on emerging topics, oral presentations, and poster sessions spanning a broad range of cutting-edge research areas, including translational science, neurodegenerative and neurodevelopmental disorders, sleep disorders, mental and behavioral health, neuroelectrophysiology, pharmacology, bioinformatics, artificial intelligence, and community-engaged research.

Attendees can expect meaningful opportunities to forge interdisciplinary partnerships, exchange knowledge on the latest advances in the field, and contribute to a growing regional neuroscience

network. The meeting is designed to support researchers at all career stages, with a special emphasis on advancing training and career development for early-stage faculty and trainees.

Whether you are a seasoned faculty researcher or an early-career trainee, this is a not-to-miss opportunity to engage with innovative leaders and help shape the future of neuroscience across the Big Ten.

***Mark your calendar for July 16th, 2026. We hope to see you there!***

**SCAN THE QR  
CODE TODAY**





# A Legacy of Discovery and Generosity: Honoring Dr. Bernd Fritzsch

We are deeply grateful to Bernd Fritzsch, PhD for his extraordinary generosity, distinguished scientific career, and enduring contributions to neuroscience, aging, and the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Dr. Fritzsch joined the Department of Neurological Sciences at UNMC after a remarkable career that included service as Head of the Department of Biology at the University of Iowa and leadership roles in the Aging Mind and Brain Initiative, where he worked closely with Matthew Rizzo, MD, FAAN, FANA. He served as Co-Director of the initiative while Dr. Rizzo led it and later succeeded Dr. Rizzo as Director when Dr. Rizzo moved to UNMC.

Across these roles, Dr. Fritzsch helped shape a major interdisciplinary effort at the intersection of aging, brain science, and translational discovery. His scholarship has been exceptional in

scope, depth, and influence. He co-edited, with Dr. Rizzo and Dr. Steve Anderson, the Wiley Handbook of the Aging Mind and Brain, and he continues to conduct brilliant and highly influential research at UNMC. Dr. Fritzsch has an extraordinary scholarly record, with nearly 30,000 citations and an h-index of 95 according to his Google Scholar

profile. His recent generous gift to UNMC to support acquisition of a state-of-the-art confocal microscope reflects the same vision and commitment that have defined his academic career. This generosity will strengthen the research environment for investigators across UNMC and help advance the next generation of scientific discovery.



*Emily Tiensvold from the University of Nebraska Foundation, Dr. Bernd Fritzsch and Dr. Matthew Rizzo*

## Ways to Support Neurosciences



*Emily Tiensvold*

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](mailto: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](mailto:shgriffin@unmc.edu)

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