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UNMC's hiring goal: 150 new faculty

Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center, nearly done, seeks best and brightest researchers and physicians

By JULIE ANDERSON
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At the same time the University of Nebraska Medical Center pushes toward completion of its new \$323 million cancer center, it's also busy adding to the list of new physicians, physician-scientists and medical researchers who will conduct research in the center's light-filled labs and treat cancer patients in its spacious rooms.

So far, the tally stands at 42 and counting, said Dr. Kenneth Cowan, director of the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center. The initial goal, he said, was 100 new clinical and research faculty, but the forecast now stands at 150 new faculty over five years, plus 1,050 new positions for clinical and research staff.

"We're definitely on pace," he said.
 Dr. Jeffrey Gold, UNMC

chancellor, said the university promised to reach across the country and around the world to find the best and brightest to staff the center, the result of Nebraska's largest-ever public-private partnership and a joint venture between UNMC and Nebraska Medicine, its primary clinical partner. The center is scheduled to open in spring 2017.

"What we're really doing right now is fulfilling the promise," Gold said. "Next spring, we want to make sure we hit the ground running."

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UNMC: Focus on researcher-physician collaboration excites one hire

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Most of the new recruits already are on campus. UNMC and Nebraska Medicine recently held a reception to welcome them. "It was a moment in time to hit the pause button, look around and welcome these wonderful people to our community," Gold said.

The recruits include rising young physicians and researchers and those with established, national-level programs. They were recruited from prestigious institutions including Harvard, Stanford and Vanderbilt or trained with fellowships at centers such as MD Anderson, Mount Sinai and Yale. At least a handful are native Nebraskans returning to their home state.

Together, they bring approximately \$11 million in total grant funding. Cancer center faculty currently account for about \$50 million in total funding, about 44 percent of the record \$115.1 million in total research funding UNMC researchers brought in during the 2015-16 academic year.

"We are in a constant, constant recruiting mode," Gold said. "That's not going away, because the demand for cancer services and research science continues to grow."

The Cancer Moonshot initiative, announced by President

Obama in his State of the Union address in January and headed by Vice President Joseph Biden, will provide additional funding across the country for cancer research, Gold said. The clinical demands in the Nebraska region and nationally will continue to increase as the population ages and the Buffett center's reputation continues to grow.

Nebraska Medicine also is gearing up. It's in the process of posting 300 job openings for the cancer center, including everything from nursing positions and patient care technicians to environmental services and food services posts. The goal is to fill the 300 jobs by the end of the year and proceed from there. The listings can be found at www.NebraskaMed.com/jobs.

The key concept behind the 615,000-square-foot facility is to bring research and treatment under one roof in order to maximize opportunities for interaction among research and clinical faculty as well as with patients, both to make sure advances in the lab are getting to patients as quickly as possible and to make sure any problems or concerns are addressed.

The building features one expansive, vaulted entrance — its escalators still under wraps — that eventually will house a reception area, dining area,

artwork, fireplace and other amenities. A bank of elevators rises to two towers, one housing a 10-story, 98-lab cancer research facility named after Walter Scott Jr. and his late wife, Suzanne, and the other an eight-story, 108-bed inpatient treatment center named the C.L. Werner Cancer Hospital.

Between the two on each floor is shared office and administrative space, known as a "knowledge-transfer zone."

The connection between the two was a particular draw for Dr. Sarah Holstein, who will head the center's multiple myeloma program. While UNMC traditionally has been strong in research and treatment of lymphoma, she said, it hasn't had the same emphasis on myeloma. Cowan noted that Holstein already is nationally recognized and collaborates on clinical trials and other research.

"As a physician-scientist," Holstein said, "I was really looking for a place that was clearly emphasizing the collaborative role between physician and scientist."

A native of Iowa City, Holstein came from the Roswell Park Center Cancer Institute in Buffalo, New York. She's joined in the program by another new faculty member. "We're really excited to build this program," she said.

Dr. Abbey Fingeret, recruited from Harvard, now is Nebraska's first and only fellowship-trained endocrine surgeon, a specialty that's been around since 2004. About 70 percent of her work involves thyroid cancer surgery. She also wants to help train the next generation of surgeons. She was recruited by Dr. Sarah Thayer, the center's physician-in-chief and a 2014 hire from Harvard Medical School, but she already had mentors in surgical education at UNMC.

Fingeret is headed to South Korea soon for more specialized training in using robotic surgery to remove the

thyroid by entering through the armpit. Korea has a high rate of thyroid cancer. But the traditional surgery typically leaves a scar on the neck, and neck scars are stigmatized there. She plans



Sarah Holstein



Abbey Fingeret

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to bring the technique back to Nebraska.

"If I can provide the same outcome, the same safety, without a scar ... I'm going to do that," she said.

Dr. Chi Zhang, recruited from Columbia University and New York Presbyterian Hospital, marked his one-year anniversary at UNMC this month and is busy building his clinical practice and starting his lab



Chi Zhang

research. He specializes in brain tumors, including the deadly glioblastoma. A key interest is finding new and more effective drugs to sensitize tumors to radiation.

He's also looking for novel ways to get such drugs into the brain, including nanomedicine.

Zhang said UNMC already has built a basis for such research, which was one reason he wanted to come.

"The good thing (about) this institution, and the whole environment in Omaha, is people are very generally nice and collaborative," he said. "The goal is to get stuff done, get stuff studied."

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KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

The Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center will house a 10-story, 98-lab cancer research center in one tower and an eight-story, 108-bed treatment center in the other. Between the towers on each floor is a shared space known as a "knowledge-transfer zone."

With the Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center on track for a spring opening, 42 new clinical and research faculty have already been hired.

VIDEO ONLINE

A tour shows how construction is progressing at the cancer center.

Omaha.com/metro

