On December 18, 2020, Drew Weissman, MD, PhD, and Katalin Karikó, PhD, arrived at the Perelman Center’s 15th floor pop-up COVID-19 vaccine clinic to receive their first dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. They were only two people out of thousands vaccinated at Penn Medicine in the final weeks of 2020, but they were two people who made it all possible.

More than 15 years earlier, the pair of researchers paved the way to the development of mRNA technology. "I’m not a person who gets excited very easily, but even I was excited about the fact that a vaccine I helped create was being injected into my arm that day," said Weissman, the Roberts Family Professor of Vaccine Research at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine.

Karikó, who carries her emotions a little closer to the surface, felt her eyes well up with tears as she walked into a conference room to receive her first jab. "It’s hard to put that feeling of overwhelming joy into words," said the BioNTech executive and adjunct professor of Neurosurgery at the Perelman School of Medicine.

These days, Karikó and Weissman are approaching celebrity status in the biomedical research community, having recently won the Princess of Asturias Award, the Albany Medical Center Prize in Medicine and Biomedical Research, the $3 million Breakthrough Prize in Life Sciences, and the 2021 Lasker Award in Basic Medical Research. Their contributions have earned them诺贝尔 Prize, the Nobel Prize, the Nobel Prize, and most recently, the 2021 Lasker Award — the top biomedical research prize in the United States. While their media appearances and awards ceremonies consume an increasing portion of their time, they spent the majority of their careers in their laboratories, laboring steadily in a pursuit of a vision.

Where It All Began

In 1997, Karikó and Weissman met at Penn. She’d immigrated to the United States from her native Hungary to expand her professional opportunities, and he had just landed here from the National Institutes of Health, where he’d been on a fellowship under the supervision of Dr. Anthony Fauci. They struck up a conversation about their work as they waited to use a photocopier to print journal articles.

Soon, the researchers were discussing ways they could work together. Karikó, who had always wanted to unleash the power of mRNA to make it into treatments for disease, agreed to create mRNA for Weissman, who was interested in it as a new approach to vaccines. In exchange, Weissman introduced Karikó to the field of immunology.

By 2000, Karikó and Weissman hit a major roadblock. The mRNA they created was causing a response in cultured human cells that could be damaging if it happened in the body. Five years later, they were able to circumvent the inflammatory response by slightly tweaking one of the building blocks of mRNA. In 2015, they built on their research by developing a delivery technique that uses lipid nanoparticles to package the mRNA in a way that helps it reach its intended destination.

But when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, they knew that their 15-year-old discoveries could help — and fast. "One of the advantages of an mRNA vaccine was how quickly it could be created," said Weissman. In an mRNA vaccine like the COVID-19 vaccine, modified mRNA instructs cells to create proteins that resemble the proteins of a virus. The body then responds to these proteins as though they are foreign.

The mRNA technology in COVID-19 vaccines got its start in Penn Medicine labs, and its impact could reach far beyond the pandemic.
Promoted to App Senior

34 APPs Across Penn Medicine

During National APP Week in October, 34 advanced practice providers (APPs) from across Penn Medicine had something extra to celebrate: their recent promotion to APP Seniors as the inaugural cohort of the Professional Advancement Model and Clinical Excellence Program (PAaCE). The APPs selected are known clinical experts and have made significant and sustainable contributions in the four domains of advanced practice: leadership, education, practice, and professional contribution.

The program’s goals include professional development, engagement, recognition, recruitment, retention, organizational alignment, and integration of APPs across Penn Medicine.

Prior to selection, the candidates for APP Senior underwent a rigorous review and were selected by a cross-entity committee consisting of Penn Medicine APP leaders, who commented, “We are quite proud of these APPs, who are so dedicated to providing the very best care to our patients.”

Visit the online edition of System News to view a video slideshow showcasing the new APP Seniors.

1,821 Veterans and Loved Ones Served—And Counting

Cohen Clinic Celebrates 5 Years

The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania, which offers no-cost mental health services to military veterans and their families throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware recently celebrated its fifth birthday with a picnic for staff and their families. Read more at System News online.

New Program Offers Vital Support to Health Care Workers at Chester County Hospital

After a stressful or traumatic on-the-job event, it’s common for health care workers to suffer emotional, mental, and/or physical effects. A multidisciplinary team at Chester County Hospital (CCH) has created a program to support their colleagues and help them through these challenging times. WeCare, a program which cares for health care providers, launched earlier this year.

Developed by Aneesha Dhargalkar, MD, an emergency medicine physician, and her administrative partners, Steve Barainyak, administrative/CEO of Turks Head Surgery Center — of which CCH is the majority owner — and Carlis Meister, MSc (A), RN, director of patient experience and risk management, the program offers a tiered-level support system for health care providers and clinicians during a traumatic or distressing work-related incident. These events can include: patient death, loss of a co-worker, or abuse from a patient or their family, among others.

• TIER 1: Support involves immediate department heads, supervisors, and/or managers who can provide resources and allow the affected employee the time to talk and debrief.

• TIER 2: Secondary support includes a trained health care worker who has volunteered to provide emotional support.

• TIER 3: Support provides the affected employee with a psychologist or therapist.

Passionate about the emotional well-being of health care providers, Dhargalkar began researching ways to implement a hospital-wide initiative to bring mental and emotional health support tools and education to her colleagues in 2019. During her research she came across Susan Scott’s work on the For You program at the University of Missouri Health System (UMHS), which served as the inspiration for WeCare. The For You program was launched after Scott’s research into “second victim phenomenon” unearthed that nearly one in seven staff members at UMHS experienced patient events that caused personal anguish.

After reading Scott’s study, Dhargalkar began working with a committee — including Meister and Barainyak — to gain the support of the hospital’s management team to launch the WeCare program. The inaugural group has since expanded to include subcommittees to oversee training, recruiting, and the scheduling of participating support.

"Having this support system behind us and ensuring that we are taken care of from a mental and emotional standpoint is just as important to our well-being as our physical health. Knowing that the WeCare team is here to help us through difficult events lifts a heavy burden that many of us would otherwise carry alone." — Aneesha Dhargalkar, MD

Molecular Discoveries

Continued from page 1

perceived threat by producing antibodies, leading to long-term protection against the real virus.

The rest, as they say, is history. To date, a combined 360 million doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines have been administered in the U.S. alone, with an additional 125 countries using the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and 70 countries using the Moderna version.

Next Frontiers

Ultimately, what Weissman and Kankio discovered years ago was a platform, not a treatment for a single disease. The genius of the mRNA technology they discovered lies in its limitless potential. In a setup often referred to as “plug and play,” researchers only have its limitless potential. In a setup often referred to as “plug and play,” researchers only have

to their creations or replace in order to target a specific disease.

Weissman and his lab have begun to develop a slew of new vaccines, including a pan-coronavirus vaccine and a universal flu vaccine. At BioNTech, where Kankio serves as senior vice president, she is overseeing parallel but distinct research mRNA that encodes for therapeutic proteins for a range of diseases.

Like branches of a tree, research projects based on Weissman and Kankio’s foundational research are sprouting quickly across Penn. In early 2022, Weissman will partner with Harvey Friedman, MD, also of Infectious Diseases, to begin human clinical trials of an mRNA vaccine for herpes, the most common sexually transmitted disease. Nearby at the newly created Center of Excellence for Influenza Research and Response (CEIRR), Scott Hensley, PhD, a professor of Microbiology, is creating mRNA vaccines for a wide range of shape-shifting influenza virus strains.

At least eight pharmaceutical companies, many in collaboration with institutions like Penn, are studying mRNA cancer vaccines in ongoing clinical trials.

For Norbert Pardi, PhD, an assistant professor of Microbiology, who was mentored early in his career by Karikó and joined Penn in a postdoctoral position 10 years ago, mRNA has formed a central career focus already. His work with Karikó and Weissman between 2011 and 2013 on mRNA technology has set the stage for his own exploration of mRNA vaccines for influenza, malaria, and more.

“We were all very enthusiastic and believed that we could use mRNA for vaccination and therapy one day,” recalls Pardi. “It is super-motivating and inspiring knowing that what I have been working on for 10 years is something that can be useful for people — just think of the impact of the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines!”

Attitude of Gratitude

Indeed, a grateful campus — and world — is thanking those who helped to pave the way for an end to the pandemic. This year, Kariko and Weissman have received notes of congratulations and encouragement from strangers around the world and from countless Penn colleagues and students, both past and present.

“Thank you for your years of research and tireless effort,” reads one such note. “And thank you from the bottom of my heart for the coronavirus vaccine. My family and I are alive because of you.”

“It’s humbling to receive such an outpouring of support because we were just a few of many people who contributed to this achievement,” Karikó said.

For visual proof of these overwhelmingly positive emotions, just look at the "I Got the Shot" posters featuring Penn staff and providers who were among the first to get their COVID-19 shots, using mRNA technology developed right here.

For instance, Occupational Medicine Nurse Danielle Lutz, RN, marveled, “This is a historical moment — we’re ending a pandemic. The importance of this is enormous.”

But many saw the opportunity on a more personal level, like Alex Borilla, administrator of practice operations. He got the shot “to be able to hug my friends and family again. The COVID-19 vaccine is a symbol of hope.”

And that hope has horizons far past the end of the COVID pandemic.

“We’re only just beginning to discover all the ways we can use mRNA,” says Weissman. “At Penn and beyond, there is so much more to come.”

To learn more about ongoing mRNA research at Penn Medicine, visit https://www.pennmedicine.org/mrna.
At UPenn, we believe the best care for our patients starts with the best care for employees. Now more than ever, self-care is critical, especially as we continue to navigate through the difficulties associated with COVID-19.

Making nutritious food choices, managing stress, exercising, maintaining a work-life balance, and avoiding unhealthy habits are key parts of a healthy lifestyle. Annual physicals, preventive screenings, and medication compliance also play a major role in overall health and wellness, particularly because chronic disease and illness have a better chance of successful treatment when they’re caught early.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a clear drop in the number of preventive screenings across the country. According to the National Institute of Health, 2020 saw a 58 percent decrease in mammograms, and, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 41 percent of adults reported avoidance of medical care during the pandemic. The statistics are no different here at UPenn. Not only is the number of preventive care visits lower than last year, but screening rates for cancer and cholesterol are down as well.

At UPenn, we realize that a key factor to reversing this trend is education and encouragement. During the month of October, the UPenn Wellington Center’s Let’s Talk series begins a new series called “Let’s Talk.” Each month, the Let’s Talk series will focus on a different chronic disease, health topic, or routine health screening. With topics like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, back pain, and more, employees will have many opportunities to learn from a UPenn expert. Each session will end with a chance for participants to ask questions, arm employees with the information they need to schedule their preventive care visits and screenings.

Self-care isn’t selfish — your work and life depend on it. Learn more and register for an upcoming “Let’s Talk” session.

Princeton Health Sponsors Pride Center of NJ Gala

Princeton Health sponsored An Evening OUT II, a semi-formal gala held September 18 in Woodbridge, N.J. to raise funds for The Pride Center of New Jersey, a nonprofit organization providing programs, support groups, activities, and advocacy for the LGBTQ community.

Princeton Health’s Reina Fleury, vice president, human resources and CHRO, and Debbie Millar, RN, director of community wellness and engagement, were featured speakers at the event.

Princeton Health’s 2021 community health needs assessment identified opportunities to foster greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in community outreach and education efforts, Millar said. Princeton Health Community Wellness leaders have been meeting regularly with Pride Center representatives to discuss plans to provide programs at the group’s headquarters in Highland Park, N.J. The partnership begins this month, with Princeton Health instructors offering Mental Health First Aid courses at the Pride Center.

Providing a safe, inclusive care environment is a point of emphasis at Princeton Medical Center (PMC), Princeton House Behavioral Health, and across the Princeton Health system. PMC has been designated an LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leader two years in a row by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, a civil rights organization working to achieve equality for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. All of Penn Medicine’s hospitals have earned this distinction.

Adding a Layer of Support for VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

One of the newest members of the trauma team at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center (PPMC) isn’t a surgeon, a nurse, or a social worker, but he could make just as big an impact for survivors of violent injuries. As PPMC’s first violence intervention specialist, Rodney Babb supports patients once they leave the hospital by helping them navigate all the challenges that can come with recovery.

Babb, who graduated Penn State University with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice, has worked as a counselor with high school students and survivors of domestic violence. But perhaps his most relevant credential is that he is a young Black man who grew up — and still lives — in West Philadelphia, like many PPMC patients.

“This position means a lot to me, being able to work with my community members, in my neighborhood, to give them the support that they don’t usually have,” Babb said. “Our goal is to provide a sense of hope.”

Babb first introduced himself to patients and their families while they’re in the hospital and offers weekly phone or video check-ins when they are discharged. He offers as much or little support as the patient wants.

“I have a lot of young men on my caseload, and I let them know that it’s alright to feel what they’re feeling — sadness, guilt, or shame,” Babb said. “I have people that I meet with weekly or biweekly, and there are some people that just need help with one thing and then they don’t need my support. Everyone is different.”

Besides offering emotional support to patients after discharge, Babb serves as a bridge to the community and social services agencies throughout the city. He might assist a patient in replacing a stolen or confiscated driver’s license, for example, or find employment leads for a survivor who used to work in construction and, due to his injuries, can’t return to that job.

“We do great for our patients while they’re here, but they’re really struggling after they go home. The physical, mental, and social consequences of a violent injury are very profound,” said Elinore Kaufman, MD, MSHP, an assistant professor of Trauma Surgery and Babb’s supervisor. “The goal with a position like Rodney’s — and there are a number of them in Philadelphia — is someone who has some shared background with our patients and an extraordinary ability to build a strong and supportive connection.”

It has only been a few months, but Babb’s impact is already being felt, Kaufman said. “While we’re not at the point where we can assess any sort of long-term outcomes, our patients have been responding to him really positively. He has been connecting with people and getting through to people who are sometimes pretty challenging to reach,” Kaufman said. “The same has been true on the side of our staff; each new person that I get to tell about this opportunity immediately recognizes the need.”

The role is funded by a grant from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. Kaufman hopes that the hospital will be able to continue the initiative beyond the grant period (which ends in April 2023) and expand the program further. While hospital-based violence prevention programs have the potential to reduce rates of repeat violent injuries, Kaufman said her primary goal is to help patients meet their own goals.

“If our patients 6 to 12 months down the road tell us, ‘I’m feeling pretty good,’ or ‘I’m feeling recovered,’ and we can measure that,” Kaufman said, “that’s what I’m aiming for.”

Princeton Health sponsors The Voluntary Benefits Open Enrollment period is upon us! UPenn “Benefit Extras” is a voluntary benefits program, administered through our partner Corestream, that benefit-eligible employees can enroll in with discounted rates paid for through a convenient payroll deduction.

During the enrollment period, eligible employees can sign up for accident insurance, critical illness insurance, and legal assistance. Additional benefits available for enrollment now (and at any time during the year) are pet insurance, auto and home insurance, and identity theft protection. Take advantage of the best deals and discounts, and use the Purchasing Power program to purchase larger-cost items — including medical care during the pandemic. The statistics are no different here at UPenn.

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Staff shortages have become commonplace around the world in the past year, and health care has been no exception. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the workforce, particularly employees serving on the front line, such as physicians, nurses, and other clinical staff. In this Q&A, Betty Craig, DNP, chief nursing officer at Pennsylvania Hospital (PAH), discussed the global staffing shortages in nursing and what is being done at PAH to support Penn’s current and future generations of nurses.

WHAT HAS IMPACTED NURSING SHORTAGES IN HEALTH CARE?
At the height of the pandemic, nurses had to adapt to tremendous changes in patient care, experiencing a new level of intensity that never seemed to change — and still hasn’t returned to normal. The emotional toll of experiencing patient mortality from COVID-19, on top of isolation from others and the fear of transmitting the virus to loved ones, led to many nurses changing their perspective of what they want to do in their careers.

WHAT IS BEING DONE FOR RECRUITMENT AT PAH?
We have brought in about 100 nurses, all levels of experience, in the past six months at PAH. We have been conducting virtual chats to provide more information on career opportunities at Penn Medicine for interested applicants. For incoming nurses, our education team has focused on ensuring a thorough orientation to help them feel comfortable as they enter a new work environment, which includes assigning them designated preceptor(s) to serve as a guide during their onboarding process. Our Nurse Residency Coordinator has worked with colleagues across the health system to adapt our program to meet the needs of new-to-practice nurses that had limited clinical experience due to the pandemic. Some of PAH’s units have even created a video that is sent to new employees after they accept a position to give them a warm welcome before their arrival and have created programs so new staff members have built in peer-support and mentorship.

WHAT EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO SUPPORT CURRENT PAH NURSES?
We’re looking at workforce needs in terms of emotional and social well-being. In addition to promoting Penn COBAL T, which provides mental health resources for anyone at Penn Medicine, PAH has been offering unit-based sessions and individual counseling so staff can focus on well-being.

We have also strengthened our shared governance structure to allow our staff to provide feedback and be part of the change for improvements in workplace culture and safety. Prior to the pandemic, meetings were held in-person. By moving this structure to a virtual platform, we saw over a 50 percent increase in participation and engagement. In addition, the Department of Nursing conducted more than 100 listening sessions with nursing and nursing support services, meeting in groups to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement on their units.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO NURSES HAVE TO ADVANCE IN THEIR CAREERS?
PAH’s mentorship program connects nurses to mentors at the hospital to help them achieve their professional goals. Our program has had over an 85 percent success rate in their mentees reaching their goals. For example, I serve as a mentor to two individuals who want to achieve leadership positions. Using tools from our mentorship program, I will help them navigate how to reach these goals and provide advice and resources along the way.

Penn’s benefits program also assists with financial support for continued education. In terms of academics, we had 19 nurses at PAH advance to a Master’s degree as a Nurse Practitioner this year, in addition to three nurses pursuing education in nursing informatics — a growing field in health care. They’ve helped us identify opportunities in medical records and electronic clinical work. PAH additionally enhanced its gateway programs — offered in Medical-Surgical, Critical Care, and Perioperative Nursing, among other departments — so nurses have the opportunity to build their skillset in different environments at the hospital.

Careers and Education

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CELEBRATING THE PAVILION, OUR BEACON BUILT TOGETHER FOR THE FUTURE OF PATIENT CARE

Continued from page 1

activities in full-scale mockups of the building’s spaces — and their feedback was so valuable that it led to redesigning the building.

Thanks to the collaboration of designers and engineers with our front-line staff, the Pavilion is built for the future of care in ways that prioritize both employee satisfaction and the patient experience. Even fine details such as the fact that patient rooms have electronic privacy glass facing the hallway and remote-adjustable external window shades, come back to that idea. Not only are the curtainless windows easier to clean for infection control, but they simplify tasks for staff, who won’t be called in to adjust them. Patients, meanwhile, get more control over their environment in a time when their autonomy is often strained — they can adjust the privacy glass, the shades, and even the lights and thermostats from their bedside.

The people whose creativity and insight have made the Pavilion welcome every possible discipline, all the facets of our work that drive high-quality care for patients. Martine Kersaint, MBA, and the Clinical Engineering team tested every activity in full-scale mockups of the building’s spaces — and their feedback was so valuable that it led to redesigning the building.

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