Endowed Funds Provide Support

"Dr. Caravati had a lasting influence on gastroenterology as a specialty in the state of Virginia, and this professorship is a good way to honor him and continue to expand on his vision."

— Arun Sanyal, M.D.

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The Charles M. Caravati Distinguished Professor in Gastroenterology
Chair of the Division of Gastroenterology, Hepatology, and Nutrition

Arun Sanyal, M.D., has devoted his career to developing effective new therapies for chronic liver diseases such as nonalcoholic steatohepatitis and cirrhosis. His research is already changing the way these potentially life-threatening conditions are treated.

Linked with weight gain and obesity, nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (or NASH) is a disease in which fat accumulates in the liver. It affects an estimated 2 to 5 percent of the U.S. population and can lead to cirrhosis, a scarring of the liver. NASH has become more common in recent years and "millions of people are at risk of developing it," says Dr. Sanyal.

In studies at VCU, Dr. Sanyal found that an increase in free radicals in the liver, and insulin resistance, could contribute to the development of NASH. These discoveries led to the first large-scale, multi-center clinical trial to find an effective drug therapy for the disease.

Last May, the results of this landmark study were published in the New England Journal of Medicine. Dr. Sanyal and his colleagues reported that a daily dose of a specific form of vitamin E significantly improves NASH in adults without diabetes. Pioglitazone, an insulin-sensitizing drug, also improved NASH but caused weight gain.

"These are important findings because there are no established treatments for NASH and this is the first evidence of something working adequately in a trial," says Dr. Sanyal. "I was surprised by the results because there are very few instances where a vitamin reverses a disease state that's not caused by a deficiency."

Dr. Sanyal is the co-chair of the NASH Clinical Research Network, a group of clinical centers funded by the NIH's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, that collaborated on the trial.

Dr. Sanyal says the support of the Caravati Professorship has ensured he can carve out time from his clinical and administrative duties to focus on moving his research forward. "That protected time allows you to develop research proposals that are more likely to get funded by the NIH or other federal agencies," says Dr. Sanyal, whose work is funded by four NIH grants. "And in the end, the results of these studies can end up helping patients in Virginia and all over the world."

Dr. Charles M. Caravati, 1900-1991

A 1922 graduate of the Medical College of Virginia, Dr. Caravati was a pioneer in the study and treatment of digestive disorders in Virginia. In the early 1940s, he became one of the first board-certified gastroenterologists in the state. From 1958 to1963 he served as chair of the division of gastroenterology at MCV and he later co-founded the Virginia Gastroenterological Society. The Caravati Professorship was established to honor his work and the endowment supports the chair of the division of gastroenterology.

for *Innovative Research*

Paul B. Fisher, M.Ph., Ph.D.

The Thelma Newmeyer Corman Endowed Chair in Oncology Research at the VCU Massey Cancer Center

Professor and Chair of the Department of Human and Molecular Genetics

Founding Director of the VCU Institute of Molecular Medicine

Paul B. Fisher, M.Ph., Ph.D, focuses on understanding disease-causing processes at the molecular level, but he always keeps the big picture in mind. "We want to see our discoveries translate into prolonging and saving lives and eliminating some very serious diseases," he says.

Dr. Fisher's team identifies important pathways and genes involved in susceptibility to cancer, neurodegeneration and infectious diseases that they then use to create new diagnostic approaches and therapies. His research is currently funded by five NIH grants, the National Foundation for Cancer Research and the Samuel Waxman Cancer Research Foundation.

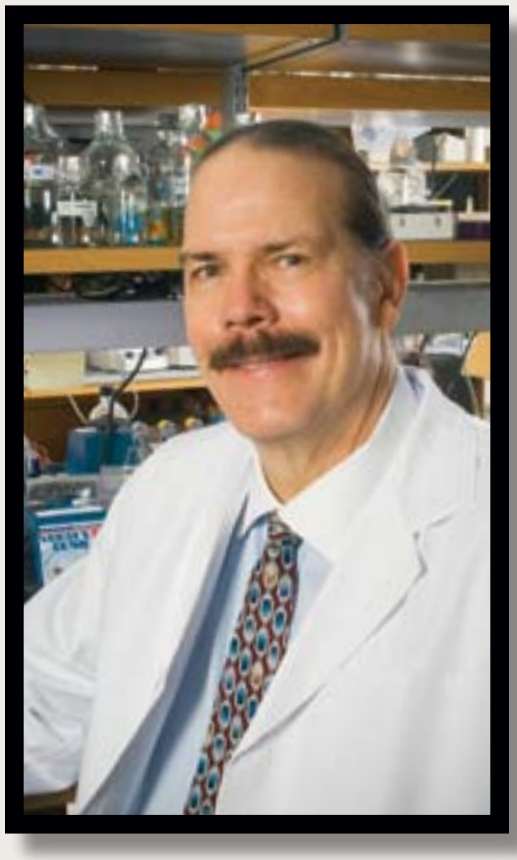
In the mid-1990s, Dr. Fisher and his colleagues discovered a gene called mda-7/IL-24 and revealed that it kills cancer cells without harming normal ones. Since then, they've used mda-7/IL-24 to develop novel therapies for a variety of cancers. "It selectively kills almost every cancer we've looked at so far," says Dr. Fisher. Initial Phase I trials in patients with advanced cancers, including carcinomas and melanomas, were very promising and indicated that mda-7/IL-24 was safe with significant anticancer activity.

Dr. Fisher also has teamed with scientists from other universities to engineer therapeutic viruses that selectively replicate within cancer cells, destroying tumors without harming healthy cells. These viruses have eliminated primary and distant tumors in studies with animal models. Now the researchers are planning a Phase I clinical trial that will examine using one of these viruses to treat malignant brain tumors in humans.

Dr. Fisher says the Corman Chair provided him with "additional resources to explore uncharted areas" in his research. That support allowed him, for example, to develop an innovative imaging technique that could help physicians detect metastatic tumors at an earlier stage. The new approach enables the visualization of small, newly formed tumors and metastases by using a non-invasive imaging technology such as a PET scan and intravenously administering an imaging agent that is paired with a specific gene promoter. "We hope to have this in the clinic within the next couple of years for diagnosing cancer," says Dr. Fisher. With appropriate modification this approach could be used to both image and destroy cancers, an approach called "theranostics."

"The Lacy family's generosity allows us to explore new possibilities in cancer research. I know they believe in this work very strongly."

– Paul B. Fisher, M.Ph., Ph.D.



The Thelma Newmeyer Corman Endowed Chair in Oncology Research

Chip and Connie Lacy have seen the good work of the Massey Cancer Center and the Thomas Palliative Care Unit first-hand in the lives of their friends and family members. To sustain this work, in 2007 the Lacys made a major commitment to support two goals: create a fund to be used at the director's discretion to support promising research programs and establish an Endowed Chair that honors Connie's mother, Thelma Newmeyer Corman. In addition to their financial support of Massey, Connie is a dedicated Massey volunteer and Chip serves as vice-chair of its Advisory Board.