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Grant to UF backs elderly independence research

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Situated in a state where many retirees love to spend their golden years, the University of Florida is set to ramp up its research on how people can remain healthy and happy as they grow older.

UF has received a \$3.9 million federal grant, which will be used to establish the Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence Center. The grant makes UF the site of one of 10 such centers in the country.

Dr. Marco Pahor, director of UF's Institute on Aging, said the grant will help place UF on the map as a major player in aging research. The grant, to be allocated over five years, will be used in part to address the problems of muscle loss in elderly people.

Diet and exercise are still the most conventional and reliable methods of staving off muscle loss, but Pahor says researchers at UF are also excited about the role that new drugs could play in keeping people strong and independent as they age. Some of the drugs, including human growth hormone, have gained notoriety primarily because they are suspected to have been abused by high-profile athletes. But properly used and tested, Pahor says these drugs show great promise for the elderly.

The new center is named for the late Claude Pepper, a former U.S. senator and longtime member of the U.S. House and state representative from Florida who backed initiatives to improve the lives of the elderly. The center will be housed in UF's Institute on Aging, which promotes the research of about 60 faculty in 11 different colleges.

It's befitting that the center will be located in Florida, where 17 percent of the population is over the age of 65, Pahor said.

Pahor said he was particularly excited that the grant will help to fund the training of junior scholars, who "will be the future leaders" in research on aging.

Pahor took over as head of UF's aging institute in early 2005, ending three years of interim leadership at the institute and creating a broad-based research vision that spans multiple colleges, according to UF officials.

During Pahor's tenure, the center has brought in about \$43.5 million in grants, which pay out about \$8.5 million a year for some 30 active research projects.

Pahor came to UF from Wake Forest, which is also home to a Pepper Center.

The institute is not in the business of research about prolonging the human life span, but rather looking for the keys to helping people maintain independence and health throughout their lives, Pahor said.

The maximum life span for humans has held steady for thousands of years, Pahor said, with even a handful of ancient Egyptians living to be around 100 years old, Pahor said. What has changed, however, is the number of people who live longer, he said.

In 2005, the U.S. Census estimated that 29.2 million Americans were 65 or older. That number is expected to grow to 58.3 million people by 2030, and of those some 12 million are expected to be disabled. The center's work is aimed at helping that aging population to remain productive.

"We have taken a holistic approach to promoting independence and preventing physical disability and decline," Pahor said in a news release. "We are really looking forward to creating a one-stop shop for aging education, research and health care."

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