

NOTE: Marco Pahor, director of UF's Institute on Aging, will discuss the award at noon today in UF's Communicore Building, Room C1-11. Please call 352-273-5819 for more details.

UF TO ESTABLISH FLORIDA'S FIRST PEPPER OLDER AMERICANS INDEPENDENCE CENTER

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GAINESVILLE, Fla. — The University of Florida's Institute on Aging has received a multimillion-dollar grant from the National Institutes of Health to establish the Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence Center. UF is one of 10 centers in the country to receive the prestigious award, which provides \$3.9 million over the next five years to fund aging research and career development.

Created and named in honor of Pepper, a former U.S. senator and state representative from Florida who dedicated his legislative career to improving the lives of older Americans until his death in 1989, the nation's Pepper Centers target research on one common fear people have about growing older — loss of independence.

“With the award, UF's IOA has joined the ranks of the most prestigious programs on aging in the nation,” said Marco Pahor, M.D., director of the institute and chairman of the College of Medicine's department of aging and geriatrics. “This grant will provide a foundation for our ongoing research endeavors, as well as support our efforts to train the next generation of leaders in aging research, education and health care.”

In the 2007-08 fiscal year, the National Institute on Aging will support 10 Pepper Centers across the U.S., each with a specific area of emphasis beyond their basic role in research and training.

As the American population grows older, the research conducted at the Pepper Centers becomes increasingly important, especially in Florida, where 17 percent of the population is over the age of 65.

UF's central mission addresses the problem of muscle loss, a process called sarcopenia. Research programs at the UF Pepper Center are organized around several core areas that bring together an interdisciplinary team of researchers, geriatricians and educators to prevent and rehabilitate physical disabilities resulting from muscle loss.

“Over time, muscle shrinks as fat expands,” Pahor said. “We are looking for novel ways to slow this process, but right now nothing beats the benefits of physical activity.”

Crossing institutional and departmental boundaries, UF’s Pepper Center unites researchers from seven UF colleges, as well as personnel from Shands at UF Medical Center and the North Florida/South Georgia Malcom Randall Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

The grant will support UF research on the biological changes that accompany aging. Scientists are in the midst of studies to determine the role of genetic, behavioral and environmental factors in age-related disability using an interdisciplinary approach that traverses the entire spectrum of biomedical investigation. Basic science projects, as well as clinical and translational studies, are under way to investigate the effects of oxidative damage on the body’s energy use, develop ways to measure the extent of age-related disability and explore the benefits of diet, exercise and other interventions on muscle quality.

The grant also provides highly anticipated seed money to initiate large-scale clinical trials. Such trials will evaluate physical activity and hormone replacement therapy as a means to improve function in seniors.

[“The Pepper Center award to Dr. Marco Pahor and his colleagues in the University of Florida Institute on Aging is both a remarkable achievement and an exciting new opportunity,” said Douglas Barrett, M.D., UF senior vice president for health affairs. “The Pepper Center at UF promises to advance knowledge and translate research findings into real-world solutions to the problems of elderly Floridians.”](#)

Pepper was known in his lifetime as a spokesman for older citizens. Not only was he a recognized advocate of the elderly, Pepper, who lived to be 89, also embodied vital, successful aging. In the Older Americans Independence Centers, Pepper’s legacy lives on.

Now through their work in geriatric patient care, research and education, health professionals at UF’s Institute on Aging work to continue Pepper’s efforts to help people live longer, stronger and more independent lives.

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