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Employee Spotlight: Dr. Martin Leamon

By Jeff Fortner, Public Affairs Specialist

VA Northern California would like to extend a HUGE congratulations to Dr. Martin H. Leamon! Dr. Leamon (second from left above) was recognized in Sacramento Magazine’s “Top Doctors List” in the Addiction Medicine category. Dr. Leamon has been serving Veterans at VA Northern California Health Care System as a psychiatrist for more than seven years (and before that, trained at VA). When he is not treating patients, Dr. Leamon serves as the director for the Addiction Recovery Treatment program and is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California, Davis.

When asked about what he wanted people to know about VA Northern California’s Addiction Medicine program, Dr. Leamon said, “They can walk into a group Monday through Friday.” With outstanding providers like Dr. Leamon and all of the hardworking support staff to back them up, it is no wonder that VA Northern California is “Our Healthy Home.”

For access to addiction medicine and mental health services, please visit https://www.northerncalifornia.va.gov/services/Mental_Health.asp
Veterans suffering from prostate, kidney, or colon cancer now have access to the latest FDA-approved robotic surgery system available. VA Northern California Health Care System was one of the first to acquire the newest version of Intuitive Surgical’s robot, the da Vinci XI.

The Sacramento VA Medical Center is currently performing minimally invasive surgery in the urology and colorectal departments. As a means to showcase the new da Vinci XI, the health care system hosted an open house for Veterans, the general public, and employees on January 25. The event was free and in the hospital’s auditorium.

“The robotic surgery system enables us to perform surgical procedures that traditionally required large incisions; now with the robot, only a few small incisions are required,” said Dr. Stanley Yap, Urologist, Chief of Robotic Surgery at the Sacramento VA Medical Center. “With finer dissection through the capabilities of the robotic arms, we can perform these surgeries with less blood loss and less pain—thus allowing Veterans to go home sooner.”

Later in the year, more departments in VA Northern California will have access to the robotic surgery system, such as general surgery; ear, nose, and throat; and gynecology.

“The newest technology helps our Veterans have better post-surgical outcomes and return back to their lives,” said Yap. “We are excited about advancements in our surgery department and that we can offer our Veterans the very best care right here in Sacramento.”
Joe started his journey as a supply technician in the United States Navy, which gave him the chance to travel the world. During his four years in service, he saw Brazil, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, and much more. Joe wrapped up his tour of duty by deploying to Kuwait and Iraq in support of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

When Joe came home to Placerville, things weren’t easy. He would go from job to job, quitting due to crippling anger and depression. “Every year that went by, I got more depressed,” said Joe. He applied for many state programs, but was not eligible.

Over the course of several years, an injury to Joe’s leg from his service became more and more painful. He had gained some weight, and he had yet to treat his depression effectively. “I was in a lot of physical pain. I weighed 347 pounds; I was just done,” he reported. Then one day, Joe decided to walk into the VA Northern California’s McClellan Outpatient Clinic.

That day changed Joe’s life. Members of a Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team, or HPACT, welcomed Joe and asked him about his needs. He was enrolled in primary care and saw a doctor, who asked Joe to list everything that needed attention. Before Joe left that day, he had received a prescription for glasses and medication, immunizations, and a leg brace. In short, Joe was able to see how VA treats the whole patient and not just...
one symptom at a time. “It felt great,” he went on. “There were multiple aspects of me being healed all at once.”

Shortly after that, Joe was back on his feet. Joe became such a big fan of VA Northern California, he decided to work here. Joe began working as a housekeeper in 2013. Shortly after that, he was promoted to supervisor. “It’s a great program; all the housekeepers were Veterans. I felt like I was part of a team again. There’s real camaraderie,” he recalls. Due to other great opportunities, Joe had to leave VA employment early last year.

These days, Joe donates his time to the Sacramento VA campus, working for voluntary services. He runs a program that helps put together bicycles from the rotary club for Veterans, and another that takes Veterans fishing; he is also planning on starting a hiking program. When asked about why Joe spends so much time in the service of other Veterans, he replies, “I just want to give back...for the rest of my life.”

Joe also advocates for VA and its services to Veterans. “Nothing happens overnight,” he says. “There are so many programs, and it’s just getting better and better. You have to decide you want help. VA opens the door, but you have to kick the door down.”

Thank you for your service, Joe!
A study of HIV conducted by researchers at the VA Northern California Health Care System in Martinez, California, showed that more than 86 percent of uninfected adults have antibodies with characteristics potentially capable of protecting them against HIV infection.

The results of the study appeared in Scientific Reports on November 24, 2016. The report describes the unexpected finding that a majority of adults without HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection have antibodies that improve interferon production. The antibody identified by Tom Lum and Dr. Jon Green, lead investigator with VA Northern California Health Care System, has the potential to act like a “natural” vaccine and prevent people from becoming infected with HIV.

The researchers were interested in understanding how large numbers of people can be exposed to HIV, while only a few contract the virus. This led to the discovery of a natural antibody that enhances the production of large amounts of a virus-fighting protein called interferon. Interferon is a powerful component that protects against most viruses. The study’s results suggest that people with these natural “anti-HIV” antibodies will produce high amounts of interferon within 24 hours of exposure to the virus, whereas those who lack the antibodies will produce only small amounts later in the infection process. Research has shown that the first 24 hours are critical in stopping the reproduction of the virus.

Under normal conditions, interferon is not made rapidly enough, or in high enough concentrations, to prevent HIV infection. HIV infection then becomes permanent and impossible to eradicate. Antibodies present in uninfected people allow interferon to be made quickly and in the high amounts capable of preventing permanent infection.

The natural antibody identified by Lum and Green may help explain how some people avoid HIV infection while others do not. Only one in 1,000 or 2,000 episodes of unprotected heterosexual intercourse results in infection, which leads the researchers to believe that people with high antibody levels may be protected, while those with low levels are not.

“These findings are not a vaccine for HIV, but allow the research community to understand more about the immune system and how it responds differently in those who naturally produce the antibody,” said Dr. Green. “Future research will need to be done to understand if enhancing antibodies protects against infection.”

This is the first known study of a potentially protective antibody against HIV in healthy uninfected people. The researchers collected blood samples for more than two years from patients in geographic areas with high (Thailand) and low (USA) risk of HIV infection. The findings suggest that “anti-HIV” antibodies are a universal part of the human immune response. Scientists speculate that future research will study a person’s natural immunity and production of anti-HIV antibodies to understand how to terminate HIV before the onset of infection.

“Additional studies are needed to determine if natural antibodies protect against infection, what antibody levels are protective, and why they are present in people without infection. Future research will be needed to determine if naturally occurring interferon-promoting antibodies can be used to develop an effective HIV vaccine,” said Green.

The researchers are available for interview. If you would like more information regarding this discovery, please contact Tara Ricks, Public Affairs Officer, at (916) 843-9247, or e-mail Tara.Ricks@va.gov.
VA partners with the PGA

For Veterans in Northern California, going once a week to play golf with other Veterans battling post-traumatic stress disorder and other health concerns can provide much-needed relief.

Sam Rocci, an Army Vietnam Veteran, has macular degeneration and has undergone many knee replacements, as well as open heart surgery. He said this is the best thing that has happened to him in a while. “I was hanging around my house, not doing a lot, and then one of my friends invited me to play golf through this program,” said Rocci. “The VA has saved my life many times, but this program gives me an opportunity to experience that new life again.”

Rocci said he looks forward to his son picking him up and playing golf regularly. “Even though I am not good at golf, it got me out of the house spending time with my son and my friends. Before we even start to play, we are out there drinking coffee, sharing war stories, laughing, and forgetting about our problems. I never knew how good this would be for me.”

It is through partnerships like this that Veterans do not have to feel so isolated. PGA HOPE (Professional Golfers Association Helping Our Patriots Everywhere) is a specialized therapeutic golf program designed to change Veterans’ daily routine and create camaraderie with other Veterans through the social interaction of golf.

“This program is fantastic for our Veterans,” said Maria Miller-Carelock, site manager for VA outpatient clinics in Fairfield and Mare Island. “When you think of golf you do not think of rehabilitation, but when you see the players and Veterans outside playing, you see it is the social interaction and the Veterans' ability to take a break from their thoughts and focus on something positive that aids in their healing process.”

PGA HOPE is a two-step program, beginning with an introductory “Down Range Clinic.” There are currently 50 programs nationwide, and VA Northern California Health Care System is a participant.

“As many Veterans struggle with the transition back into civilian life, the game of golf delivers camaraderie and a new level of enjoyment that provides them with hope,” said PGA President Derek Sprague. “We are thrilled to collaborate with VA to offer PGA HOPE programming nationwide, as the PGA of America is committed to making a more meaningful impact on the lives of America's Veterans.”
Healthy Recipe!

Chef Jeff’s Springtime Brown Rice and Quinoa Kale Salad

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup uncooked organic quinoa
- 1/2 cup uncooked organic brown rice
- 2 cups filtered water
- Pinch of kosher or sea salt
- 1/4 cup organic extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- Zest from 1 medium organic lemon
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher or sea salt
- Fresh cracked black pepper, to taste
- 3 cups chopped kale
- 1 large organic avocado, seeded, peeled, and diced

Directions

1. Combine the quinoa, brown rice, water, and salt in a medium saucepan. After bringing the water to a boil, reduce the heat to low and cover the pan.
2. Gently simmer, covered, for 15 minutes (there may still be some water not yet absorbed). Remove from heat.
3. Keeping the pan covered, let it stand for 5 minutes, or until the remaining water is absorbed.
4. Remove the lid and gently fluff the quinoa/rice. Set aside to cool.
5. In a bowl, whisk together the olive oil, balsamic vinegar, lemon zest, lemon juice, mustard, salt, and pepper. Set aside.
6. In a large bowl, toss together the cooked quinoa, kale, and avocado. Toss with the dressing and serve at room temperature.