FBI Calling
A little more than a year ago, Beatriz Luna got a phone call from officials at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). They asked her a few questions, told her the reason for the call "might be very good," and left it at that. Shortly thereafter, she received a letter from the FBI, asking for permission to release her files.

At such times, she says, one doesn’t know what to think. This summer, the University of Pittsburgh PhD associate professor of psychiatry and psychology and director of the Laboratory of Neurocognitive Development at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic learned some good news.

The White House named Luna one of 56 recipients of the 2005 Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers. The award provides her with approximately $1 million to continue her NIH-funded research into adolescent brain development. Luna's work delves into the role an adolescent's developing frontal cortex plays in executing cognitive tasks. Too much frontal cortex activity, she says, can essentially burn out that portion of a teenager's brain, leading to impulsive behavior. Her work is helping scientists understand why adolescents tend to put themselves in precarious situations. —Joe Miksch

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FLASHBACK
[The president of Harvard University] actually proposes to have written examinations for the degree of doctor of medicine. I had to tell him that he knew nothing about the quality of the Harvard medical students. More than half of them can barely write. Of course they can't pass written examinations.

—Harvard professor of surgery Henry J. Bigelow, c. 1869

PITT AGAIN RANKS 7TH IN NIH FUNDING
The National Institutes of Health recently released data showing the University of Pittsburgh and its affiliates (such as Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and Magee-Womens Research Institute) were awarded $431 million in grants in the 2005 fiscal year. That makes Pitt the seventh highest ranked university for the agency's funding a second year in a row. The University took in $396 million in fiscal year 2004.

"Almost 80 percent of the University's total NIH funding is generated by medical school faculty," says Arthur S. Levine, senior vice chancellor for the health sciences and dean of the School of Medicine at Pitt.

He notes that the University's percentage increase is second among the top 15 institutions funded by the NIH and that Pitt ended fiscal 2005 almost $37 million ahead of the eighth-ranked institution, Washington University in St. Louis. Pitt has closed to within $560,000 of number six on the list, UCLA.

"The $560,000 represents one grant," Levine says. —JM
Patrick Kochanek has often glanced with admiration at Peter Safar’s awards displayed at the Safar Center for Resuscitation Research. This year, the American College of Critical Care Medicine recognized the University of Pittsburgh’s Kochanek as a Distinguished Investigator, an honor Safar received in 1995. Kochanek, a professor and vice chair of critical care medicine who now directs the Safar Center, studies acute brain injury.

Kochanek’s work spans a number of injury processes, including traumatic brain injury, blast injury, cardiac arrest, and hemorrhagic shock. His approach involves linking lab work to real human conditions so that doctors can better understand and treat head injuries.

The American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation has named Ross Zafonte its Walter J. Zeiter Lecturer for 2006. Like Kochanek, he has fostered a reputation as an accomplished researcher of brain injury, particularly traumatic injury. Zafonte, chair of Pitt’s Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, says it’s not so much his individual accomplishments as a clinician and researcher that netted him the award. Rather, being named the Zeiter lecturer is a testament to the growth of Pitt’s physical medicine department.

“I’ve tried to grow the residency program and develop curious clinical investigators,” he says. “We’re always trying to plow ahead in rehabilitation medicine.”

The human immune system remembers exposure to bacteria and viruses. Geetha Chalasani would like to make it forget sometimes. Chalasani, an assistant professor in the renal-electrolyte division of the Department of Medicine at Pitt, recently won the John Merrill Transplant Research Scholar Award from the American Society of Nephrology and the American Society of Transplantation. The award, worth $200,000 over two years, will help her pursue her research.

Chalasani, an MD, is interested in the process by which B cells generate memory T cells that are necessary to mount rapid attacks against invaders. Understanding this mechanism, Chalasani says, could help develop a regimen to curtail immune system responses prompted by transplanted organs.

Speaking of transplantation, Thomas Starzl, Distinguished Service Professor of Surgery in the School of Medicine, recently earned the American Society of Transplantation’s highest honor, the Roche Ernest Hodge Memorial Award.

—Alicia Kopar & Joe Miksch

Top 10 Reasons to See a Therapist

On orientation day, Lee Wolfson (above) stood before the University of Pittsburgh med school’s incoming Class of 2010 with a David Letterman–style top 10 list of reasons students should seek him out. Among those: Your girlfriend says, “We need to talk” (Reason Number 4). Reason Number 1? You take Psychiatry and are convinced you have at least three Axis I diagnoses. Inevitably, med students come across academic and emotional detours en route to earning their degrees. When these moments arise, Wolfson is there to help. He directs the Medical Student Counseling Program, the first office of its kind, which was founded more than 25 years ago at Pitt. Wolfson, who received his master’s degree in education from the University in 1976 and worked at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic for 21 years, now tailors his interpersonal psychotherapy counseling to the specific needs of med students. He talked with us days before flying to Malaysia to speak before the World Congress of Psychotherapy.

Common issues students face

I see 50–60 percent of students at some point in their four years of [med] school. Their most common problems are depression and anxiety. Sometimes they’re having a hard time academically. They’re also carrying enormous debt. I try to give them support and help them maintain confidence. The stress of med school is unrelenting. Whatever vulnerability they might have already, med school is going to exacerbate that.

Advice for incoming students

It’s important to develop real self-compassion. These students are really driven, and sometimes that drive turns into feelings of worthlessness if they’re not achieving at the level they’re used to. My key point: Never lose sight of your original vision of yourself as an individual, a doctor, a healer. And if there’s a bump on the road—and there will be—give me a call. It doesn’t go on your record, and we don’t bill your insurance. It’s completely confidential.

His question for the world

One of my favorite quotes is from Rainer Maria Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.” So I ask, what are the questions that you have learned to love? —Interview by Jennifer Dionisio

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Make Me a Match

Among the 20 or so scientists stationed in front of display posters in the William Pitt Union’s lower lounge one October night was Uddhav Kelavkar, nattily dressed in a black-and-gray checked jacket over a black mock turtleneck. This assistant professor of hematology and oncology at the University of Pittsburgh believes he has found a better way to detect prostate cancer. It has to do with a gene he has been researching for more than a decade.

Kelavkar was an exhibitor at Science 2006’s Technology Showcase. In a room full of people talking hard science—peptides, histones, epithelial—Kelavkar gave passersby an “elevator pitch,” a layperson’s explanation for why his work matters.

“If you live long enough, you’ll get prostate cancer,” he told one man, a scientist with salt-and-pepper hair clutching a Penn Pilsner. The conversation got more candid from there as Kelavkar brought up erectile dysfunction and urine collection bags, describing how quality of life “goes down the drain” with some prostate cancer surgeries.

“We men are really doomed,” the listening scientist responded with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

The University’s Office of Enterprise Development and Office of Technology Management sponsored the showcase. Its main purpose was pollination, by putting venture capitalists and scientists in a big, plush room with an open bar and buffet of roast beef and salmon for two hours. Exhibitors had promising early results. Firms represented had the know-how and licensing dollars to bring discoveries and inventions to real patients. The possibility of matchmaking gave the event an ambience somewhere between a middle school dance and Mensa gathering.

The exhibitors revealed new medical software, implantable technologies, and gene therapies while they dished on where to get the freshest tissue samples. A plurality were cancer researchers like Kelavkar, who, toward the end of the event, leafed through the business cards he’d collected in his suit pocket. It had been a good night.

“This guy,” he said, tapping a card left by a venture capitalist, “he wants to see our manuscript.” —Reid R. Frazier

CliffsNotes: Class of 2010

Sometimes it seems that the only tie that binds Pitt med students is that they are Pitt med students. The Class of 2010 is no different, with 148 aspiring physicians hailing from the four corners of the United States and the four corners of the world.

Narrowing the view a bit to look at some of those with Western Pennsylvania connections, we find more of the same: a great deal of difference.

Brian Slater enrolled at Pitt in 1991 and earned his BS in 2000, then his MS in 2003. The intervening years for this 33-year-old were spent working as a paramedic in Pittsburgh and, after graduating from the University, in Peter Safar’s lab on a project that aimed to keep wounded soldiers in a state of suspended animation until they could be taken from the battlefield to an operating room. Quyen Nguyen, also a Pitt grad, shared the Pittsburgh Pops stage at age 16 with Marvin Hamlisch. The pianist also is an artist, having contributed a ceramic mural to Heinz Field, home of the Pitt Panthers and Pittsburgh Steelers football teams. Jean-Claude Mganawa Rwigema’s parents sent him from ravaged Rwanda to South Africa to finish high school in peace. He later found his way into a joint chemistry/engineering program at La Roche College and Pitt, graduating near the top of his class in 2003. Gillian Beauchamp spent a decade as a professional dancer before turning toward medicine, a career switch presaged by her double major in dance and biology at Rutgers University. Among the companies she has performed for is Pittsburgh’s Dance Alloy. Adam Greenlee’s ties to Pitt med may be the strongest of all. He’s the grandson of Daniel Paul Greenlee (MD ’24), thought to be Pitt med’s oldest living alumnus before he died in March 2005, at age 102. —JM
Name-Dropping

Pitt welcomed these scientific heavyweights to campus this fall for Science 2006, the University’s annual celebration of research in medicine, engineering, computation, and basic science:

Just before Stanford University’s Roger Kornberg left for Pittsburgh to give the Dickson Prize in Medicine Lecture, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced he’d be getting the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Kornberg offered the world the first molecular picture of how information stored in the genes of organisms with well-defined cellular nuclei (like mammals and yeast) is copied and transferred to the parts of cells that produce proteins. A PhD professor of structural biology at Stanford, Kornberg’s recent discoveries include isolating proteins responsible for transcription and gene regulation. Kornberg is the 11th Dickson Prize winner also to be honored with a Nobel. His father, Arthur Kornberg, another genetics researcher, won the 1959 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

Carla Shatz, chair of the Department of Neurobiology at Harvard University, delivered the Mellon Lecture. As the PhD has worked to understand the essential patterns of brain development, she has found that long before humans are capable of seeing, the retina generates waves of activity that establish cell pattern formation in the brain.

Klaus Hofmann lecturer Baldomero Olivera is into poisonous sea snails, but not because he’s a thrill-seeker. He has found that their venom contains peptides that hold potential for drug discovery. Olivera is a PhD, Distinguished Professor of Biology at the University of Utah, and adjunct professor at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies. —JM

ARTISTIC LIFELINES
In the world of illness, art does what medicine can’t—express confusion, anger, fear, strength, and hope. In late August, the Hillman Cancer Center lobby hosted a 30-piece traveling exhibition called “Oncology on Canvas: Expressions of a Woman’s Cancer Journey.” Women chronicled their lives with cancer using watercolor, acrylic, oil, pastel, charcoal, and photography.