

Med School Watercooler

NEWS FROM FREDERICK P. WHIDDON COLLEGE OF MEDICINE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

Thursday, April 29, 2021

Commencement, honors ceremonies set for COM Class of 2021




The University of South Alabama College of Medicine will hold its 2021 commencement ceremony on Thursday, May 6, at 7 p.m. at the Mitchell Center on the USA campus.

The Class of 2021, with 69 members, will become the 46th class to receive medical degrees from the USA College of Medicine. Students will take the Hippocratic Oath and be hooded by a person of their choosing. Graduates matching at U.S. military facilities also will take the military oath.

In addition, two students in the Basic Medical Sciences Graduate Program will receive doctoral degrees at the ceremony and will be awarded doctoral hoods by their major professors.

Graduates may invite up to four guests to the in-person event. Social distancing protocols will be observed, and all faculty, students, attendees and guests will be required to wear masks while in the Mitchell Center. The ceremony also will be live-streamed on the USA webpage at southalabama.edu for those who are unable to attend.

Meanwhile, an invitation-only honors ceremony is planned for 36 medical students who are receiving awards on Wednesday, May 5, at 10 a.m. in the Student Center Ballroom. The Class of 2021 brings the total number of physicians to graduate since the medical school's opening to 2,905.

Posted by Med School Watercooler at 2:03 PM No comments: 

Cybersecurity safety meeting set for May 6



The USA College of Medicine dean's office will sponsor a cybersecurity safety meeting at 11 a.m. Thursday, May 6, via Zoom. All faculty, staff and students are invited to attend.

David Furman, director of IT risk and compliance at USA,

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will give an overview of cybersecurity best practices for work and home. There will be time for questions and answers.

Please join the Zoom meeting to learn more about this important topic:
<https://southalabama.zoom.us/j/97530077701>

If you have any questions, contact Marcina Lang at
marcinalang@southalabama.edu.

Posted by Med School Watercooler at [10:06 AM](#) No comments: 

Wednesday, April 28, 2021

College of Medicine faculty recognized as 'Top Profs'

The Sally Steadman Azalea Chapter of the Mortar Board Senior Honor Society recently highlighted professors at the University of South Alabama with its seventeenth annual "Top Prof." Each year, the members of Mortar Board select instructors as top professor recipients based on how they have positively influenced the lives of students at the university.

The professors chosen from the USA College of Medicine were Richard Honkanen, Ph.D., and Thomas Rich, Ph.D. Honkanen is professor and chair of biochemistry and molecular biology. Rich is an associate professor of pharmacology.

Alia Tayara, an honors senior biomedical sciences major, chose Rich as her "Top Prof," because of his care and guidance with students and those he mentors. Tayara took an honors elective class that Rich taught with other faculty members, and went on to be his mentee for her thesis project. Rich encouraged her to be actively involved in organizations, community service and research. Tayara attributes Rich with helping her become a more confident presenter and speaker by presenting concepts assigned to her during his labs, an environment that she described as welcoming and diverse.

Tayara said one of Rich's greatest qualities is his depth of understanding students and the pressure that is placed on them to excel. He applies that consideration when determining his expectations and when working with those he mentors to ensure that they are given a manageable workload.

"I will always be thankful for the time I spent working in Dr. Rich's lab," said Tayara. "He has expanded my science knowledge exponentially, given me confidence in my presentation skills, and set an example for me in productivity and forward thinking."

Hanna Bobinger, the current 2020-2021 president of the Mortar Board Sally Steadman Azalea Chapter and a senior chemical engineering major, also chose Rich because his mentorship helped her grow into a more confident researcher and leader. At Rich's offer, Bobinger was able to work with one of Rich's colleagues in Paris at the Sorbonne University and Institute of Biology Paris-Seine. With Rich's assistance, Bobinger obtained an American Heart Association Fellowship and a SURF fellowship for summer 2018 and summer 2020, respectively.

"Without Dr. Rich, that transformative opportunity would not have been possible, and it definitely prepared me to communicate and practice as a physician with a diverse patient population," Bobinger said. "Outside of research, Dr. Rich has continuously supported my professional goals and was always willing to provide letters of recommendation for scholarship and fellowship applications. I definitely would not be where I am today without his mentorship these past four years."



Thomas Rich, Ph.D.

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Hannah Giannini, a chemistry major who recommended Richard Honkanen said he has been her research mentor since her sophomore year. Giannini said Honkanen is a patient professor that is always willing to go above and beyond for students. In his lab, Honkanen adjusts concepts to be understandable at an undergraduate level and is willing to answer questions and provide helpful feedback to student presentations. He is involved in his lab member's research to ensure that projects are well-understood every step of the way, while still allowing students to maintain their autonomy.

Because of Honkanen's dedication to his students, Giannini was able to resume working in the lab last summer during a time when few undergraduates were given the opportunity. He also offered additional help to Giannini's research by culturing cells during Hurricane Sally.



Richard Honkanen, Ph.D.

"Dr. Honkanen has definitely helped me in my college journey," said Giannini.

"Many of his students have gone on to prestigious graduate programs. I am grateful that Dr. Honkanen uses what he has learned to give me advice. He has been an excellent motivator!"

The Mortar Board Senior Honor Society is a national honor society that consists of college seniors that have exhibited exceptional leadership and dedication to their universities. The "Top Prof" recipients are typically honored with an awards dinner held by the society, but the ceremony was held virtually this year. Each professor was acknowledged in a video wherein the students recognized their chosen professor's involvement during their years as an undergraduate.

Posted by [Med School Watercooler](#) at [4:06 PM](#) No comments: 

Meet a Med Student: Mary Katherine Moore

Mary Katherine Moore

Age: 24

Class of: 2024

Hometown: Birmingham, Ala.

Undergrad/grad institution: The University of Alabama

Degrees earned: Bachelor of Arts in Spanish, minor in chemistry; Master of Business Administration with a concentration in public health


Interests, hobbies: Travel, reading, running and cooking

Something unique about me: I speak Spanish and, prior to medical school, I worked with the Infectious Disease COVID-19 Research Team at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

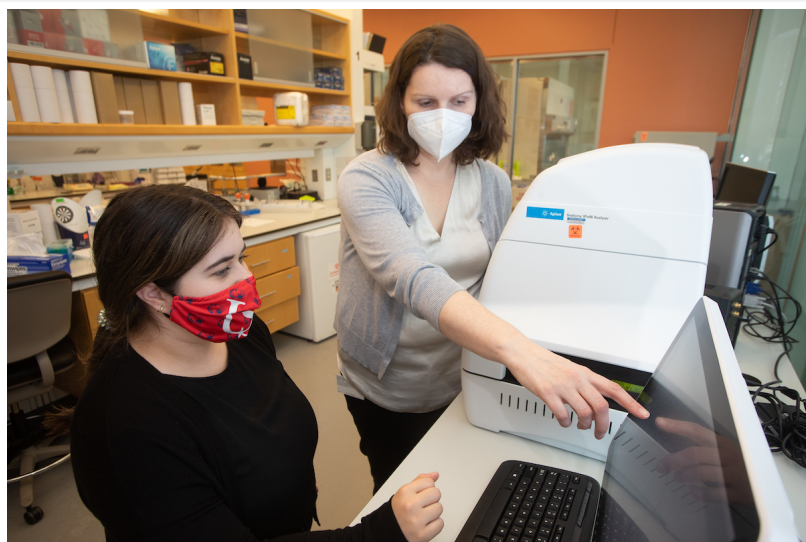
Three of my favorite things: Coffee, all things Christmas and taking mission trips to Panamá.





Posted by Med School Watercooler at [2:00 PM](#) No comments: 

'A flamethrower of chemicals': Researcher focuses on dangers of vaping



Natalie Gassman, Ph.D., assistant professor of physiology and cell biology, and Arlet Hernandez, a graduate student in the basic medical sciences program, left, are conducting research on the harmful effects of dihydroxyacetone, a molecule produced by electronic cigarettes.

Years of cancer research, along with concern about environmental exposure to toxic chemicals, led Natalie Gassman, Ph.D., to focus on the harmful effects of dihydroxyacetone – DHA – a molecule produced by electronic cigarettes.

Millions of young people have turned to vaping as an alternative to smoking tobacco, but they're still inhaling a noxious mix of toxicants and carcinogens.

"E-cigarettes are like a flamethrower of chemicals," said Gassman, assistant professor of physiology and cell biology at the USA College of Medicine, and a researcher at the USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute. "You can make them safer, but they're never going to be safe. The market is flooded with versions that are identical if not worse than traditional cigarettes. There are cheap ones you can buy off the Internet that are contaminated with heavy metals. It's like smoking air pollution at that point."

In January, Gassman received a \$1.1 million grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences that will fund her research for the next five years.

At the Mitchell Cancer Institute, she won the 2019 Mayer Mitchell Award for Excellence in Cancer Research and the 2020 USA Center for Lung Biology Murray Bander Faculty Development Award.

Gassman earned degrees at Michigan State University and UCLA. She did post-doctorate research at Wake Forest and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, which is part of the National Institutes of Health. In 2015, she joined the faculty at USA and the staff at MCI.

"She had great training and background," said Robert Sobol, Ph.D., program leader of metabolic and molecular oncology, who recruited Gassman. "We thought she'd make a great addition to the program, and you can see by her grants and awards that she's done a fantastic job. She's really embraced the

University, too, serving on the Faculty Senate and as chair of the Institutional Biosafety Committee.”

Gassman’s research has shown that DHA exposure causes cell injury and impairs cell function, which may contribute to lung damage. She and her collaborator, Marie Migaud, Ph.D., professor of pharmacology, have identified a protein, triose kinase/FMN cyclase (TKFC), that is critical to the incorporation of DHA into cells and their metabolic pathways.

Vaping has grown exponentially in adolescents and young adults, which makes e-cigarettes a public health concern.

“There is a pressing need to understand how electronic cigarettes damage the lungs,” Gassman said, “in order to develop treatment strategies for users and regulations to restrict dangerous ingredients.”

She and Casey Daniel, Ph.D., M.P.H., assistant professor of family medicine and a researcher at MCI, spent several years studying the effects of dihydroxyacetone in spray tanning products. It was this work that led to research on DHA in electronic cigarettes.

“We were kind of struggling because we knew it was interesting research, but it didn’t have that broader appeal,” Gassman said. “When we figured out that the mobilant in e-cigarettes, which is typically propylene glycol and glycerol, when they’re ignited, they form dihydroxyacetone, that was a big thing for us. Now you’re going to directly inhale something. You’re not going to have the benefit of your skin filtering it. You’re going to take it into your mouth, down your throat and into your lungs, and then your lungs are going to distribute it through your blood vessels to your heart and other organs.”

Graphical Abstracts

Last year, the DNA Repair journal published a special issue honoring Samuel Wilson, Ph.D., one of Gassman’s mentors at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. She and Griffin Wright, a doctoral student in the basic medical sciences graduate program, produced a graphical review for “Transcriptional dysregulation of base excision repair proteins in breast cancer.”

Charts for their article used labeled boxes, waves and arrows to help describe how proteins are regulated under normal cell conditions and in the context of cancer.

“That was an interesting exercise,” Gassman said. “I’m not artistic at all, but I’ve been trying to get better at making figures that are compelling. Journals are really changing now. They want you to have graphical abstracts. A lot of them want you to make short videos about what your paper is about.”

Working in the MCI laboratory with Gassman is Arlet Hernandez, another graduate student in the basic medical sciences program.

Hernandez didn’t have much lab experience before coming to South, but she’s already working on experiments with mice. She’s looking forward to helping Gassman write journal articles on their dihydroxyacetone research.

“We have some data already,” she said. “Each cell line has differences in how they react to DHA. We’re just trying to connect the dots on what’s happening.”

Hernandez, 24, is a Cuban-American who earned her bachelor’s degree at Florida International University in Miami. Once or twice a year, she returns to South Florida.

“I have cousins who use e-cigarettes,” she said. “I tell them not to, but they don’t listen to me. They’re young.”

Focus on E-Cigarettes

When Gassman isn’t working, she enjoys rowing and kickboxing. She owns four dogs. She’s also a baker who shares cookies and brownies with researchers at MCI.

Cancer research is serious, but she hasn’t lost a sense of humor about her role in the field. One of her missions is to educate people, especially pregnant women,

about the danger of chemicals in plastic that are present in dozens of household items. She tries not to overdo it.

"I'm kind of a bummed," Gassman said, laughing. "I'll tell you about all the bad things that you're surrounded by on a constant basis."

She and Daniel, who are both pale-skinned, agree that they are unlikely tanning researchers.

"We're the whitest people in the world — we don't go out in the sun — but we were interested in sunless tanning, spray tanning, and we went off on this tangent," Gassman said. "It's been this amazing four-year journey."


Since joining MCI, Gassman has submitted more than 20 scientific articles that have been accepted for publication. Postdoctoral work prepared her for a career in science, but taking research into new areas remains a daunting experience.

"Science is exciting like that, but it's also super terrifying, because what if you're wrong?" she said. "That's one of the things I've gotten from all of the experience I've had, and working with different mentors. They help you feel confident that you're doing the right things and your answers make sense."

Focusing on DHA and electronic cigarettes makes her research less abstract and more immediate. There are obvious public health implications to her work. Lives are at stake.

E-cigarettes are often used to help people stop smoking, but they offer their own set of risks. Research has just begun into the long-term effects of vaping.

"I think e-cigarettes are going to be one of these things," Gassman said, "where when we look back, we're going to say, 'What were we thinking?'"

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