Buffalo Pharmacy MAGAZINE

VOLUME 9 | 2026

MOVING FROM **DISCOVERY** INTO **PRACTICE**

How intentional decisions are advancing research into real-world application **p8**

UB RESEARCHERS **WIN NATIONAL AWARD** **p7**

STUDENT INITIATIVE BRINGS NARCAN ACCESS **p12**

$3.5M STUDY YIELDS DIABETES BREAKTHROUGH **p14**

BuffaloPharmacy MAGAZINE

VOLUME 9 | 2026

EDITORIAL TEAM

Katie Brigham
Associate Director, Communications, Marketing and Outreach

Samantha Nebelecky
Assistant Director, Communications and Marketing

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Devon Dams-O'Connor
Laurie Kaiser
Judson Mead
Sarah Sterzinger
UBNow Staff

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Dave Donati/Lynda Donati
Green Soup Design

PROOFREADING

Ann Whitcher-Gentzke
G&A Services

PHOTOGRAPHY

Douglas Levere
University at Buffalo

Meredith Forrest Kulwicki
University at Buffalo

Nancy J. Parisi
Social Documentation Photography

Joseph Priore
Priore Photography & Video

Buffalo Pharmacy Magazine is an annual publication for alumni and friends of the University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences.

Get In Touch
To share ideas or feedback with *Buffalo Pharmacy Magazine*, please email the Office of Communications at sppsdean-comms@buffalo.edu.

Send address updates or other news by email to sppsdean-alumni@buffalo.edu or by mail to the Office of Alumni Engagement, University at Buffalo, School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, 284 Pharmacy Building, 160 Hayes Road, Buffalo, NY 14214-8033.

Message From The Dean

The expectations placed on public research universities are rightly ambitious. We are called not only to educate students, but also to serve society in a visible, meaningful and enduring manner. The public expects our work to improve lives and to confront complex challenges. And they expect that the investment they make in us, through their trust and their tax dollars, will yield measurable and lasting returns.

At the University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, that responsibility is both our charge and our privilege.

For more than a century, we have prepared pharmacy practitioners and pharmaceutical scientists who shape the future of health care across New York State, the nation and the world. Our graduates lead in community pharmacies, hospitals, industry, academia, government and entrepreneurial ventures. They expand access to care, advance discovery and elevate the role of pharmacy within a rapidly evolving health care system.

Our faculty and trainees generate new knowledge and translate discovery into solutions that improve patient outcomes. The interdisciplinary nature of academic pharmacy, coupled with UB's collaborative culture, positions us well to bring together scientists, clinicians and public health experts to address society's most pressing health challenges. Complex problems demand integrated approaches, and that is our sweet spot.

As a public institution, we remain firmly committed to accountability, especially to the citizens of New York State. The economic impact of our work is substantial: For every state salary dollar invested in us, we generate nearly $20 in economic activity. Yet even that impressive figure tells only part of the story.

Our true return on investment is measured in healthier communities, improved patient lives, the strength of the health care workforce and the leadership of our alumni. It is reflected in the innovations emerging from our laboratories and in the expanding impact of pharmacists in delivering patient-centered care.

The progress highlighted in this magazine is not accidental. It is the result of careful planning and fruitful partnership among faculty and staff, students and alumni, supporters and friends. As we look ahead, our ambitions are bold. We aim to accelerate discovery, expand experiential learning, strengthen community engagement and ensure that financial barriers never prevent talented students from pursuing a career in pharmacy or the pharmaceutical sciences.

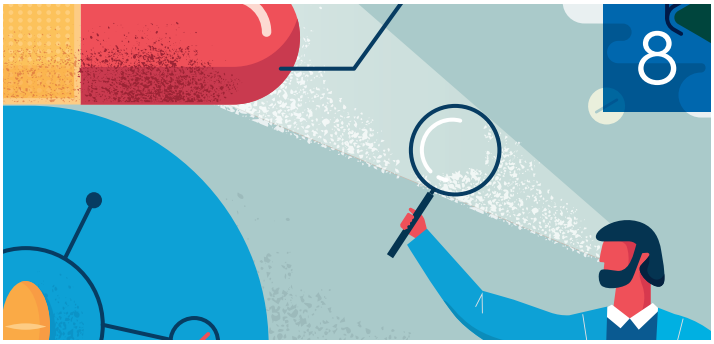
Achieving these goals will require all of us. Your engagement, advocacy and philanthropy are essential to sustaining our momentum and amplifying our impact. Together, we will ensure that UB's School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences not only meets the expectations placed upon it, but also sets the standard for what a public research institution can accomplish.

I am deeply grateful for your continued partnership and proud to share the impact we are making—together.

Warm regards,

Gary M. Pollack, PhD
Professor and Dean

In This Issue



8

COVER STORY

Moving from discovery into practice

How intentional decisions are advancing research into real-world application

12

FEATURE STORY

A resource within reach

Student leads project to outfit Pharmacy Building with Narcan kits

DEPARTMENTS

2 **CELEBRATIONS & SALUTATIONS** 2025 Commencement • Spring Celebration: Graduation and Awards Luncheon • Welcome Week • New Faces and Fond Farewells

5 **ACCOLADES** Balu-Iyer named fellow of National Academy of Inventors • Faculty Leaders • UB researchers' paper on transitions of care wins national award

14 **INNOVATIONS & EXPERTS** Qu and team make diabetes breakthrough in $3.5 million funded study • Q&A: Examining evolving access to weight-loss medications • Study shows students' views on mental illness can shift with education • Expanding access to injectable contraception • AI lab evolving to improve drug development, advance research • Using AI to predict and prevent hospital readmissions • Q&A: Addressing myths and misinformation about childhood vaccines

21 **STUDENT LIFE** Celebrating a decade of Pharmacy Summer Institute • Broadening perspectives through international experiences • PharmD students working to reduce illness, increase immunizations • Supporting community care at Lighthouse Medical Clinic • From the classroom to the capital • Learning and Engagement Communities foster connection and professional growth • Kawa, PharmD '27, elected national president-elect, APhA-ASP • Student Accomplishments • Incoming PhD scholars recognized with prestigious fellowships

29 **ALUMNI** A welcome return: Alumni Reunion Celebration 2025 • Alumni honored for excellence and service • Such good friends as these • Wing and Rosina Lun endow pharmacy scholarship • Cecilia Cheng's good fortune

2025 COMMENCEMENT

The University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences held its 2025 Commencement on May 17 at the Center for the Arts on the North Campus, proudly honoring **160 GRADUATES** from the PharmD, BS, MS and PhD programs.

Mario Rocci Jr., PhD '81, BS '76, chairman and chief executive officer, Catalyx, delivered the commencement address. A graduate of SPPS, Rocci also serves as executive chairman of Solvias, executive advisor and board member for The IMA Group, and strategic advisor to Water Street Healthcare Partners. His previous roles include division president at ICON plc, chief executive officer of Prevalere Life Sciences, and head of the Laboratory for Investigative Medicine in the Division of Clinical Pharmacology at Jefferson Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University. Rocci has served as president of both the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists (AAPS) and the American Society for Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics (ASCPT) and has chaired several national task forces and boards. He has received numerous honors, including the Distinguished Service Award and a Presidential Citation from AAPS and the Henry W. Elliott Distinguished Service Award from ASCPT.

Curtis Haas, PharmD '89, chief pharmacy officer, University of Rochester Medical Center, served as the guest speaker. A SPPS graduate, Haas has more than three decades of experience in pharmacy practice, education and leadership, including 18 years in acute care across clinical, administrative and research roles. He also serves as a faculty member at UB where he earned tenure as associate professor. Specializing in critical care for 17 years, Haas has contributed extensively through teaching, research and national presentations. His professional service includes leadership roles with the American College of Clinical Pharmacy and the Board of Pharmacy Specialties. He has been actively involved in training pharmacy students, residents and fellows for more than 25 years.

DEGREES CONFERRED:

- 12 BS
- 46 MS
- 3 BS/MS
- 93 PharmD
- 6 PhD

"Today is a monumental day. It's a day we've been working toward for years, not just through assignments, exams or research, but through everything that's shaped us along the way."

—Raelea Derylak, president, PharmD Class of 2025

SPPS graduates and faculty celebrating at commencement


Bachelor of Science graduating students


Mario Rocci Jr., PhD '81, BS '76, delivering the commencement address


PharmD graduating students

SPRING CELEBRATION:
Graduation and Awards Luncheon

On May 16, the University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences gathered at Banchetti by Rizzo's in Buffalo for our 2025 Spring Celebration: Graduation and Awards Luncheon. The event celebrated our 2025 PharmD and Pharmaceutical Sciences graduates and honored 53 award recipients. Honorees included three faculty members, one staff member, three alumni, three preceptors and 43 students, who were recognized for their contributions to the school's mission, impact on the pharmacy profession, and dedication to academic excellence throughout the 2024–2025 academic year.


Graduating students and award recipients of the Dr. Alan Forrest Pharmacometrics Professional Development Award


Graduating students and award winners


Graduating students and award recipients of the 2024 AMCP Chapter of the Year award

WELCOME WEEK:

August 21-26, 2025

Our 2025 Welcome Week kicked off with an exciting series of events for incoming pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences students, designed to introduce them to the school and our community. The week featured a multiday orientation program, White Coat Ceremony for first-year PharmD students and a school-wide ice cream social.

ORIENTATION

Pharmaceutical Sciences graduate students at orientation

Incoming PharmD students participated in a two-day orientation, held Aug. 21-22, while incoming pharmaceutical sciences graduate students participated in a one-day program on Aug. 22, designed to support their transition into academic and professional life. Students met with faculty, staff and current students, learning about academic expectations, resources, career advising and professional development opportunities. Pre-pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences undergraduates joined Welcome Weekend activities on Aug. 22, touring the Pharmacy Building, participating in student success and goal-setting workshops, and enjoying an ice cream social with faculty, staff and fellow students.

WHITE COAT CEREMONY

Students from the PharmD Class of 2029 reciting the Oath of a Pharmacist at White Coat Ceremony

PharmD Class of 2029 at White Coat Ceremony

A significant rite of passage, the annual White Coat Ceremony marks a student's formal entry into the profession of pharmacy. It represents a commitment to compassionate patient care and to upholding the highest standards of moral, ethical, legal and professional conduct. Our 2025 ceremony held on Aug. 21 welcomed 138 PharmD students from the Class of 2029 to the UB family.

"The White Coat Ceremony is a milestone for our school and for each of you, our first-year students. It marks an important transition—from student to student-pharmacist, from learner to future colleague. It is at once a personal achievement and a commitment to something larger than yourselves."

—Gary Pollack, PhD, Dean, SPPS

ALL-SCHOOL ICE CREAM SOCIAL

Students enjoying all-school ice cream social at the Pharmacy Building

Welcome Week concluded Aug. 26 with an all-school ice cream social at the Pharmacy Building. Open to all SPPS students, faculty and staff, the event provided an opportunity for our community to reconnect and celebrate the new academic year. Attendees enjoyed lawn games and a spirited tug-of-war pitting students against faculty and staff, capping off a week full of connection and school pride.

NEW FACES AND FOND FAREWELLS

The past year brought exciting changes to our SPPS community. We warmly welcome new faculty and staff, celebrate colleagues who earned well-deserved promotions, and pay tribute to those who have moved on—recognizing their contributions and the lasting impact they made during their time with us.

Karl Williams, JD, MBA, BS '80, appointed the inaugural director of legislative advocacy and a clinical professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, effective Jan. 1, 2025.

Amy Bayerl, appointed business operations coordinator, Office of Finance and Resource Management, effective Jan. 13, 2025.

Sarah Sterzinger, MS, appointed associate director of alumni engagement, Office of Alumni Relations, effective Jan. 27, 2025.

Kris Jordan, advanced pharmacy practice experience coordinator, Office of Experiential Education, served 38 years at SPPS and retired effective May 31, 2025.

Drew Lambert, PharmD '11, appointed clinical assistant professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, effective July 7, 2025.

Renée D'Aprix, EdM, appointed experiential education coordinator, Office of Experiential Education, effective July 7, 2025.

Ashley Woodruff, PharmD, clinical associate professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, appointed associate dean, Professional Education, effective Aug. 1, 2025.

Arinze Nkemdirim Okere, PharmD, MS, MBA, appointed division head, Division of Outcomes and Practice Advancement and a clinical professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, effective Sept. 2, 2025.

Kathleen M.K. Boje, PhD, associate dean, Office of Professional Education and associate professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, served 32 years at SPPS and retired effective Sept. 3, 2025.

Md. Mohaimenul Islam, PhD, MS, appointed research assistant professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, effective Sept. 10, 2025.

Nicole Albanese, PharmD, assistant dean, Office of Student Success and Engagement, promoted to the rank of clinical professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, effective Nov. 1, 2025.

Collin Clark, PharmD, promoted to the rank of clinical associate professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, effective Nov. 1, 2025.

Brian Tsuji, PharmD, associate dean, Clinical and Translational Sciences; division head, Division of Clinical and Translational Therapeutics; Edelman Endowed Chair in Experimental Therapeutics; and professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, accepted a new position as dean of the Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, effective Jan. 1, 2026.

Serena Washburn, MS, student engagement coordinator, Office of Student Success and Engagement, accepted a new position as an academic advisor, UB Honors College, effective Jan. 1, 2026.

Nicole Cieri-Hutcherson, PharmD, assistant director, Experiential Education, and clinical associate professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, accepted a new position as a senior clinical content consultant pharmacist in women's health at Wolters Kluwer, effective Jan. 11, 2026. She will remain at SPPS as an adjunct associate professor in the Department of Pharmacy Practice.

Sathy Balu-Iyer, PhD

Balu-Iyer named fellow of National Academy of Inventors

BY LAURIE KAISER

Sathy Balu-Iyer, PhD, UB Distinguished Professor in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, has been named a fellow of the National Academy of Inventors (NAI), the highest professional distinction awarded solely to inventors.

Balu-Iyer is one of 185 exceptional inventors selected for the 2025 class of NAI Fellows. Collectively, this year's cohort holds more than 5,300 U.S. patents and includes recipients of the Nobel Prize, the National Medal of Science and the National Medal of Technology and Innovation, as well as members of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

"It's such an honor to be part of this esteemed fellowship," says Balu-Iyer, who was appointed associate dean for research for the pharmacy school in 2019 and holds more than 50 patents or patent applications related to drug therapies.

Over the past three decades, Balu-Iyer has conducted extensive research in protein therapeutics and immunotherapy, co-founded a biotechnological company and secured more than $5 million in research funding from the National Institutes of Health.

"We are exceptionally proud of Dr. Balu-Iyer for his numerous and significant contributions to the pharmaceutical sciences and to the field of immunotherapy," says Gary Pollack, PhD, dean, SPPS. "Inclusion in the highly competitive National Academy of Inventors speaks volumes about his dedication and persistence in creating new therapies, obtaining patents and improving therapeutic efficiencies that ultimately will save lives."

Balu-Iyer and his fellow honorees will receive their medals at the 15th Annual NAI Conference on June 4, 2026, in Los Angeles, California.

Balu-Iyer has produced seminal research on taxol-lipid interactions, which formed the foundational formulation for lifesaving cancer drugs. His work has also led to innovative strategies to reduce unwanted immune responses to protein-based therapies by inducing immunological tolerance, with applications in treating autoimmune conditions such as Type I diabetes and allergies.

That research resulted in the founding of Immune Modulatory Therapies LLC, a Buffalo-based company launched in 2019. His UB co-founders include Richard Bankert, PhD, professor of microbiology and immunology in the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, and Robert Chau, PhD, research scientist in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences.

In addition, Balu-Iyer provides research expertise to two other Buffalo-based startups: Immunotolerx, a drug discovery and development accelerator, and Truvai Biosciences, a technology company specializing in strategies to reduce immunogenicity. These companies have licensed SUNY patents developed in Balu-Iyer's laboratory to advance immunotherapies for a range of clinical applications. He has also served in advisory roles for biotechnology companies.

A member of the UB pharmacy faculty since 1996, Balu-Iyer has received more than $5 million in funding from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute for research focused on improving the therapeutic efficiency of protein drugs by reducing or reversing unwanted immune responses.

His work has also been supported by grants from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the Empire Discovery Institute Medicines Discovery Award Program, the SUNY Research Foundation and UB's Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences.

A fellow of the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists, Balu-Iyer has received numerous honors recognizing the impact of his work, including the Biotechnology Innovation Award and the Inventor of the Year Award from the Niagara Frontier Intellectual Property Law Association.

Balu-Iyer continues to pursue new therapeutic approaches, including research evaluating immune responses in humans using artificial intelligence–based methods.

"I have always wanted to improve drug therapies while contributing to the economy," he says. "I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to do so at UB."

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>
> *—Sathy Balu-Iyer, PhD*

Faculty Leaders

Our faculty play a central role in shaping the future of pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences through leadership, collaboration and service to the profession. Below, we recognize those appointed to key leadership roles at the university and within national and international professional organizations, and we highlight the influence their work will continue to have well beyond Buffalo.

1. **Nicole Albanese, PharmD,** assistant dean of student success and engagement and clinical associate professor of pharmacy practice, was named chair of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy (ACCP) Endocrine and Metabolism Practice and Research Network in 2025, reflecting national leadership in clinical education and practice advancement.

2. **Joseph P. Balthasar, BS '91, PhD '96,** David and Jane Chu Endowed Chair in Drug Discovery and Development, professor of pharmaceutical sciences and director of the Center for Protein Therapeutics, received a 2025 UB Entrepreneur Award for translating research in protein therapeutics into commercial impact, including platform technologies that contributed to three FDA-approved FcRn inhibitors for autoimmune disease and two startup acquisitions by major pharmaceutical companies.

3. **William J. Jusko, PhD,** SUNY Distinguished Professor of Pharmaceutical Sciences, received the 2025 ACCP Therapeutic Frontiers Lecture Award, honoring his career-long impact on clinical pharmacology and pharmacometrics.

4. **Yeh-Hsing "Sima" Lao, PhD,** assistant professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, was selected to the Early Career Board of Nano Letters for the 2025–26 term and named co-chair of the Americas regional group, reflecting international recognition of his work in drug and gene delivery.

5. **Molly Maloney, MLS,** pharmacy liaison librarian, was elected chair-elect of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Drug Information and Library Science Section, beginning a three-year leadership term in 2025.

6. **Gina Prescott, PharmD,** clinical professor of pharmacy practice and director of global and community outreach, received the 2025 AACP Public Health Special Interest Group Best Publication Award for co-authoring a national, multi-institutional study on teaching social determinants of health and health equity.

7. **William Prescott, PharmD,** chair and clinical professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, was appointed associate editor of the American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education in 2025, recognizing his national leadership in pharmacy education scholarship and peer review.

8. **Mary Riedy, PharmD,** Margaret Hempling McGlynn Endowed Chair in Clinical Pharmacy and clinical assistant professor of pharmacy practice, was elected director at-large of the Pediatric Pharmacy Association Board of Directors, beginning her three-year term in 2025.

9. **Nicholas Smith, PharmD, PhD,** assistant professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, received the 2025 UB Exceptional Scholar: Young Investigator Award, recognizing his leadership on a five-year NIH R01 project advancing bacteriophage-based therapies.

10. **Ashley Woodruff, PharmD,** associate dean for professional education and clinical associate professor of pharmacy practice, was named an ACCP Fellow in 2025 and recognized as an Outstanding Reviewer for the Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy.

UB researchers' paper on transitions of care wins national award

BY LAURIE KAISER

Every year, more than 425,000 high-risk patients nationwide are released from the hospital only to return within 30 days. This situation not only negatively affects patients, but it also saddles hospitals with $6 billion in annual costs that can be passed along to patients and affect their care.

Often, it is the medications prescribed to these patients—typically those suffering from heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or pneumonia—that contribute to the readmissions, according to David Jacobs, PharmD, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Pharmacy Practice.

"Discrepancies in drugs, adverse drug reactions and dangerous drug interactions all send these fragile patients back to the hospital," says Jacobs, lead author of a study exploring a solution to this revolving door: pharmacist-led interventions within primary care clinics during transitions of care (TOC).

A paper highlighting the study's findings, titled "Clinical and economic effectiveness of a pharmacy and primary care collaborative transition of care program," was selected as the 2025 American Pharmacists Association (APhA) Best Clinical Paper. Jacobs conducted the study with several UB pharmacy, medicine and public health researchers.

"Transitions of care refers to the movement of patients between health care practitioners and from other health care settings to home as their condition and care needs change," Jacobs says. "Primary care providers' workload pressures continue to increase. A pharmacist-led TOC intervention can free clinical time for the provider and improve patient care."

For the study, researchers focused on hospital-to-home transitions. They evaluated 300 adult patients between 2019 and 2021 at three primary care practices in Western New York.

After implementing a multifaceted pharmacy intervention—including medication reconciliation, comprehensive medication review, and provider and patient follow-up—they discovered that hospital readmissions and emergency room visits dropped by 46%, and the net financial benefit was $9,078.

"There are so many changes in medication lists when a patient enters the hospital vs. when they come home," Jacobs says. "Our job as pharmacists is to work with the care team in the hospital and in the primary care practice to ensure consistency and accuracy with the medication regimen. This means identifying and resolving any discrepancies and addressing issues like omissions, duplication, incorrect dosage and unintentional medication changes."

To qualify for the study, patients needed to have conditions that put them at high risk of readmission and be regularly taking at least 15 prescription drugs. An almost equal mix of males and females was represented. Participants were between the ages of 58 and 78, with an average age of 67.

L-R: David Jacobs, PharmD, PhD, associate professor of pharmacy practice, and Erin Slazak, PharmD, clinical associate professor of pharmacy practice, accepting award for the 2025 American Pharmacists Association Best Clinical Paper.

The intervention included:

- Reviewing the patient's medication records at the practice, including hospital notes and discharge summaries, and reconciling any differences
- Completing a comprehensive medication review to identify medication-related problems such as potential adherence and access issues
- Sending notes to the primary care provider via electronic health records, noting recommended interventions
- Documenting final updates to the patient's medication records and delivering important information to the patient and their caregiver in person or by phone whenever possible

"Problems often arise when communication breaks down among health care providers, patients and their caregivers," Jacobs says. "We tried to eradicate that through our interventions."

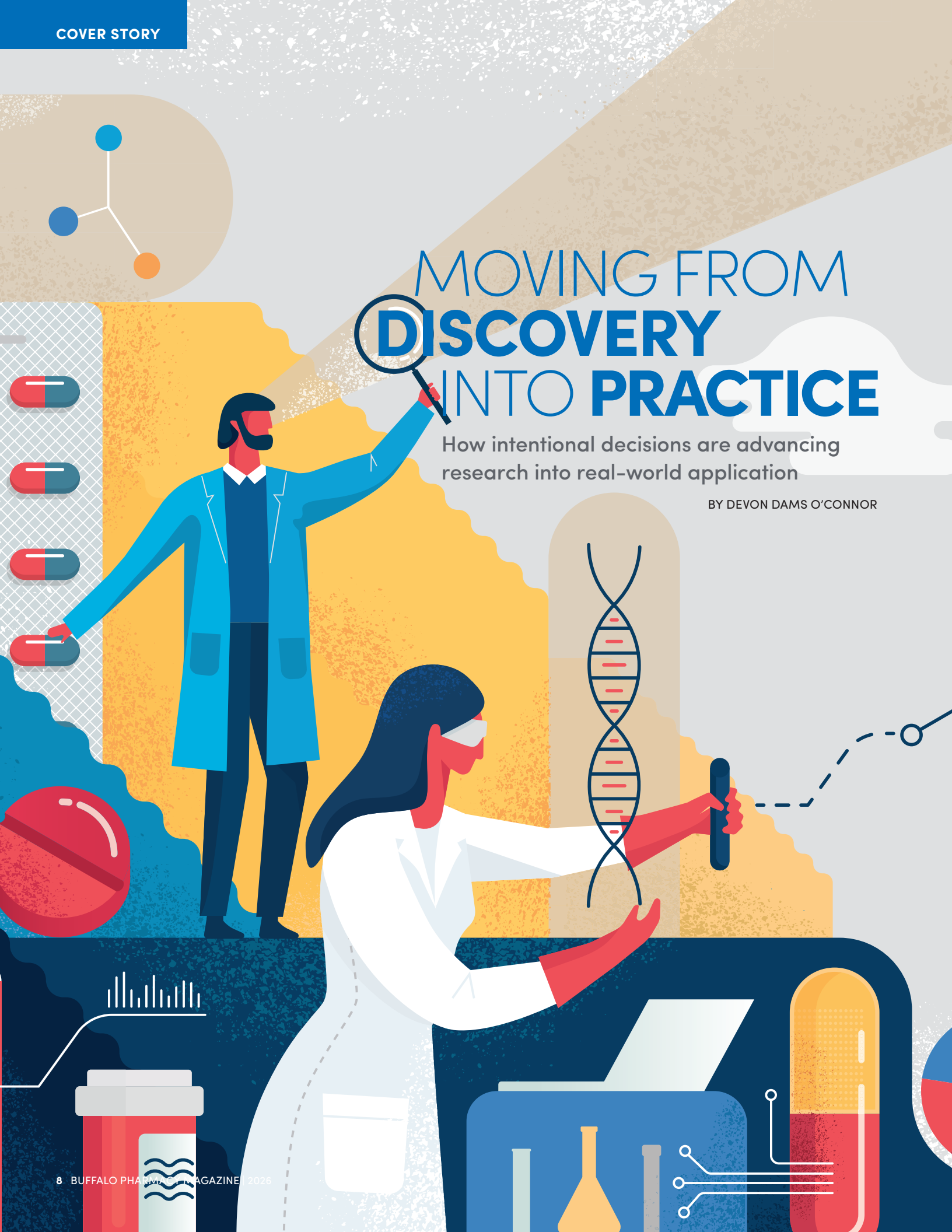
The physicians, he noted, were extremely interested in participating in the study and working collaboratively.

"I think you see that when you have these different groups, whether it be pharmacy, medicine or nursing, working together, you can improve health outcomes," he says.

Despite an increased focus on care transitions nationwide as health care shifts toward value-based care, no single TOC intervention has consistently been shown to improve post-discharge outcomes, Jacobs says.

"What we know is that there is no single component that fixes hospital readmissions," Jacobs says. "This is why we focused on a medication reconciliation component, a comprehensive medication review and evaluation, and consistent and ongoing communication. It's this multifaceted approach that's really needed."

Jacobs received the award for best clinical paper on behalf of the research team at the APhA Annual Meeting and Exposition in Nashville, Tennessee, in March 2025.

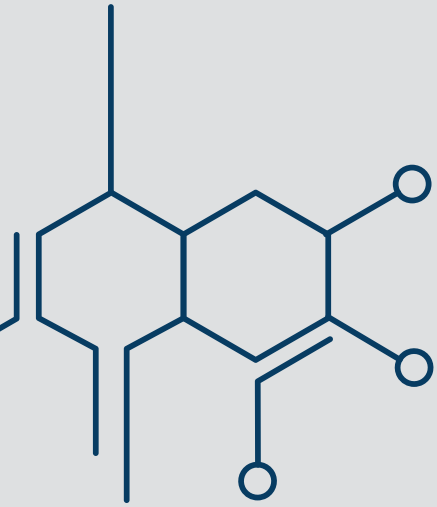


MOVING FROM DISCOVERY INTO PRACTICE

How intentional decisions are advancing research into real-world application

BY DEVON DAMS O'CONNOR

There's science for science's sake. Then there's science set on discovering solutions to society's most pressing health issues. Research at the UB School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences falls firmly into the latter category.



"The concept of aligning our work with societal need is really something that has been part of the culture in our school for a long time," says Gary Pollack, PhD '84, dean of the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences. "Our faculty are involved in a wide range of research. What's different here is that it's always approached with first asking, 'How is this going to be a building block that will impact patient care?' That's been the case since I arrived here as a graduate student in 1979."

By focusing research on emerging health priorities, prioritizing collaboration and reflecting those values in pharmacy education, UB SPPS has set its sights on transforming pharmacy innovation into real-world impact.

Understanding and responding to public need

To be most impactful, research interests at SPPS are purposely aligned to investigate solutions for prevalent diseases and conditions threatening global populations, which can pivot over time.

"If we learned anything from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's that widely transmissible infectious disease is a national security threat," says Pollack. "We need to be prepared to respond quickly and effectively, so we're building a framework and foundational network to be resilient down the road."

Infectious disease is the research specialty of Yanan "Nancy" Zhao, MD, PhD, professor, Division of Clinical and Translational Therapeutics, Department of Pharmacy Practice. Over the course of a career that began during the first SARS outbreak in China, she developed novel molecular diagnostic platforms for various fungal and bacterial pathogens. This experience allowed Zhao to quickly build up a novel diagnostic assay for COVID at the beginning of the pandemic. That work sparked an interest in treating resistant infections; eventually, she focused on drug development to treat these infections. This, she says, is an incredibly urgent mission.

"Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) poses huge threats to human health," explains Zhao. "Based on the most recent statistics, more than 39 million deaths are estimated from antibiotic-resistant infections between 2025 and 2050. As a benchmark, during the five-year COVID pandemic, a total of seven million people died. We need to work up new therapies against AMR because these microbial organisms are so smart: They develop different resistance mechanisms that don't respond to treatment with all the antibiotics we have."

Her lab is currently collaborating with Liang Chen, MD, PhD, professor, Division of Clinical and Translational Therapeutics, Department of Pharmacy Practice, on a grant submission to support investigation of a nonantibiotic strategy against multidrug-resistant Klebsiella pneumoniae, a top priority bacteria pathogen, according to the World Health Organization.

Another newsworthy health topic under exploration is cannabinoids, structural classes of compounds that include CBD and THC, which are increasing in popularity as additives to consumer goods ranging from seltzers to vape pens. Philip Lazarus, PhD, division head, Division of Molecular Biosciences, and professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, is investigating how certain enzyme groups in the body metabolize chemical compounds, and how cannabinoids could impact that process.

One of his current studies suggests that CBD may help smokers cut back on cigarette use by slowing nicotine metabolism, extending the effects of each cigarette and reducing the number of butts (and all the carcinogens they contain) smoked overall. On the flip side, he's also looking at how cannabinoids might decrease the metabolism of certain opioid medications like hydrocodone and

hydromorphone, which could cause increased levels of these opioids and ultimately increase toxicity or even the risk of overdose. The nicotine study recently received Institutional Review Board approval to move forward in human clinical trials, and the opiate study is pending.

Zhao, Chen and Lazarus are among seven new faculty recruited to SPPS during the 2024-25 academic year to form the Drug Discovery, Development and Evaluation (DDDE) Hub, a dedicated research engine in the fields of pharmaceutical research and translational sciences. It was created to accelerate the discovery of treatments for life-altering diseases and is the only pharmaceutical think tank of its kind in the country.

UB resources encourage collaboration, accelerate work and improve outcomes

SPPS researchers are active participants in the many centers, hubs and institutes at UB designed to foster collaboration and coordinate drug discovery, development and evaluation activities throughout the university.

"This work spans the university," says Pollack. "Elements of drug and device development happen in pharmacy, medicine, biology, engineering, management and law. Problems facing society now are complex and are not amenable to uni-disciplinary approaches. Programs and professionals who consider that range of perspectives will be the ones who will be the most helpful."

In addition to the DDDE Hub, several pharmacy researchers participate in the Empire Discovery Institute, a nonprofit drug discovery and development accelerator and collaboration among UB, Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center and the University of Rochester. Its purpose is to translate promising scientific discoveries into breakthrough treatments and cures, support vital upstate New York pharmaceutical research efforts, and foster the development of a vibrant biotech startup community within New York State.

Meanwhile, the Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI) accelerates clinical and translational science to improve public health and facilitates collaboration among UB researchers representing several scientific disciplines, regional medical centers and practitioners, and community stakeholders.

New York State's designating UB as a hub for Empire AI is also having a major impact on research. This initiative has prioritized the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for good in research across university disciplines, including pharmacy.

SPPS leveraging AI to improve health outcomes and advance drug discovery

On the clinical side, Arinze Nkemdirim Okere, PharmD, MS, MBA, BCPS, BCCP, division head, Division of Outcomes and Practice Advancement, and clinical professor, Department of Pharmacy Practice, is looking at ways to advance health outcomes through implementation science and the application of AI in predictive algorithms. With a particular interest in improving care for rural and underserved communities, he's working on using AI to improve prescribing practices and identify patients at risk for certain diseases. Recently, he developed an AI model to predict hospitalization and 90-day rehospitalization of at-risk patients with cardiovascular disease using patient survey responses measuring medication adherence and confidence in medication use.

> **"Instead of 12 years to develop a drug, we could get it into the market in two to three years."**
>
> *—Sathy Balu-Iyer, PhD*

In the lab, Sathy Balu-Iyer, PhD, associate dean for research and professor, Division of Drug Delivery and Pharmaceutical Bioengineering, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, is interested in AI-driven predictive modeling as an alternative to animal trials for drug testing, and to increase the odds of success once the drug advances to human clinical trials. He's currently using this method to examine potential human immune responses to new protein replacement therapies to treat certain genetic conditions. Balu-Iyer anticipates the approach could accelerate the drug discovery process, saving money and time.

"Instead of 12 years to develop a drug, we could get it into the market in two to three years," he says. "By predicting what will happen in humans during the early stages of the drug development, you can avoid drug attrition at later stages."

Entrepreneurial endeavors accelerate drug development

With looming uncertainty around the future of federal scientific research funding, pharmaceutical sciences investigators are turning to the private sector for financial support. Partnering with industry to accelerate drug discovery and development is essential now more than ever, explains Joseph Balthasar, BS '91, PhD '96, David and Jane Chu Endowed Chair in Drug Discovery and Development, professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, and director, Center for Protein Therapeutics. He says investment by industry is what brings a drug from lab bench to bedside.

"There's something of a gap between work done under typical faculty funding and what's required to advance a treatment through clinical testing and FDA approval," Balthasar explains. "It can take more than $2 billion to get a drug to market. The National Institutes of Health might fund a few million. The rest requires partnership with companies, who can then manufacture and distribute the drugs once they're approved."

Bettering a therapy's odds of reaching patients led Balthasar to explore the entrepreneurial side of science. A Payload-Binding Selectivity Enhancer (PBSE) platform developed by Balthasar's lab to decrease the toxicity of anticancer antibody-drug conjugates was licensed to Abceutics Inc., a spinout company he co-founded. Abceutics was acquired by Merck in 2024 to support development of their PBSE candidates.

Balu-Iyer has also taken entrepreneurial and industry engagement approaches to advance drug development. In 2019, he co-founded the company Immune Modulatory Therapies LLC to commercialize his foundational formulation for protein-based therapies to treat cancer and autoimmune conditions including Type 1

diabetes and allergies. Two additional Buffalo startups have licensed patented discoveries from Balu-Iyer's laboratory to develop immunotherapies for broad clinical indications: Immunotolerx, a drug discovery and development accelerator, and Truvai Biosciences, a technology company specializing in patented and cutting-edge strategies to reduce immunogenicity.

Balthasar and Balu-Iyer both worked with another university entity on their entrepreneurial efforts: UB Business and Entrepreneur Partnerships and its Center for Advanced Technology in Big Data and Health Sciences (UB CAT), which provides funding and incubator lab space and helps faculty researchers protect intellectual property, commercialize their technology, establish startups, connect with industry, draw up contractual agreements and access economic development funding.

Structural and cultural shifts align pharmaceutical sciences and pharmacy practice

The breadth and depth of translational research activity among faculty has a profound impact on the next generation of pharmacists and pharmaceutical scientists. Taught by research pioneers and humanity-minded practitioners, SPPS students receive training and education steeped in a long-standing culture of impact.

"The primary influence is keeping everyone—faculty and students—grounded in real world application," says Pollack. "A real benefit to our students is that it ingrains that approach in them; they're not off working on something disconnected to society. The culture we create connects work to meaning."

Since Pollack's arrival, the school has undergone significant transformational changes to better align its resources with its intentions.

A recent curriculum overhaul integrated elements of pharmacy practice and pharmaceutical science—two historically disparate departments—into unified lesson plans that now deliver related information together. Now, for example, when students learn about which drugs are available for certain indications (pharmacy practice), they simultaneously learn how the drugs work (pharmaceutical science).

"When these two departments and the curriculum are integrated, then it clicks for the students in terms of education," explains Balu-Iyer.

Shortly after these curricular improvements, the Department of Pharmacy Practice instituted a new divisional structure to organize faculty and staff into distinct areas of focus: Clinical and Translational Therapeutics, Education and Teaching Innovation, and Outcomes and Practice Advancement. The Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences followed suit a short time later, organizing into divisions of Pharmacokinetics-Pharmacodynamics and Systems Pharmacology, Drug and Biotherapeutic Discovery, Molecular Biosciences, and Drug Delivery and Pharmaceutical Bioengineering. The new divisions help publicly depict the school's strengths, allow faculty and students to identify with defined interests, and help the school recruit and retain talent.

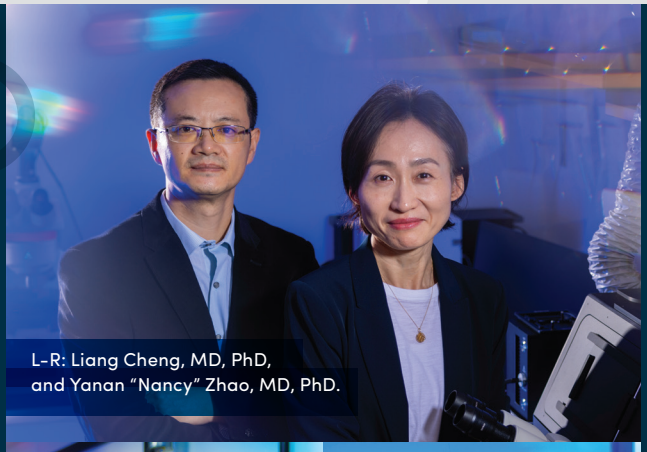
Impact is evident in society

While the pharmaceutical innovations can take years to travel from academic research to neighborhood clinics and pharmacy counters, the impact new treatments have on people's health can be life changing.

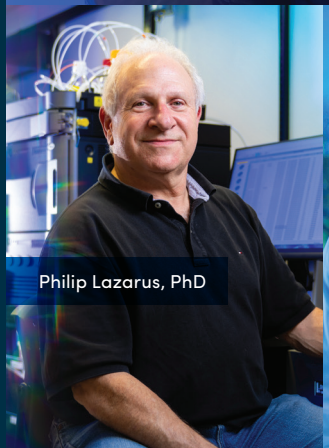
"The pharmacy timeline is long," says Pollack. "But we can point to all sorts of successes. New compounds that have reached the public in recent years to treat obesity are profoundly impactful therapeutic agents, for example. It took a long time to get there, but people can see the end result. We're proud of our school's research legacy and future, and all the good we're working on right now to make tomorrow even brighter."

"The primary influence is keeping everyone—faculty and students—grounded in real world application. A real benefit to our students is that it ingrains that approach in them; they're not off working on something disconnected to society. The culture we create connects work to meaning."

—Gary Pollack, PhD, Dean, SPPS



L-R: Liang Cheng, MD, PhD, and Yanan "Nancy" Zhao, MD, PhD.



Philip Lazarus, PhD

Joseph Balthasar, BS '91, PhD '96

A resource within reach

Pharmacy student leads project to outfit Pharmacy Building with Narcan kits

A portrait of Karina Germakovski, photographed holding a package of Narcan, in the Pharmacy Building. Photographer: Douglas Levere

BY LAURIE KAISER

The red 7.75- by 6.25-inch boxes positioned in walls throughout the University at Buffalo Pharmacy Building are small but mighty.

Installed above each of the building's eight automated external defibrillators (AEDs), the boxes contain four emergency doses of naloxone hydrochloride, known more commonly by the brand name Narcan.

With a spray administered through the nose, Narcan can reverse opioid overdoses, saving lives just as AEDs save people from cardiac arrest.

"Opioid overdose rates have skyrocketed throughout the country, and Narcan can stop them," says Karina Germakovski, a dual-degree graduate student in pharmacy and clinical and translational sciences. "I am passionate about reducing overdoses through Narcan access and education."

Germakovski, who is in her fourth year in the pharmacy program, spearheaded a project to install the lifesaving kits throughout the 160,000-square-foot building that houses the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences' classes, laboratories and offices.

It was a two-year effort involving UB's Environment, Health and Safety unit; University Police; faculty, staff and students in the pharmacy school; and the Erie County Department of Health.

Along the way, she garnered the support of Gary Pollack, dean of the pharmacy school.

"I strongly believe in making Narcan available not only to students but also to visitors to our building," Pollack says. "As health care professionals, we should take the lead in the fight against opioid overdoses, and I'm so impressed by Karina and her determination to get this important project underway at UB."

The kits reinforce Narcan boxes that are already available in all UB residence halls and in University Police vehicles.

"Even if there isn't an immediate need," Germakovski says, "it's an important resource to have on hand in case they, a friend or a family member ever face an emergency."

Born in Ukraine, Germakovski grew up in New Hampshire. During her undergraduate study of biomedical science at the University of New Hampshire, she became interested in addiction, starting with nicotine.

Now a Western New York Prosperity Fellow, Germakovski serves as co-chair of the Operation Substance Use Disorder Committee of the UB student chapter of the American Pharmacists Association (APhA).

Germakovski and her two co-chairs began working on the project Narcan in Our Schools in spring 2023. They started by talking to students at Amherst Central High School about substance abuse and demonstrating how to use Narcan.

"I thought to myself: How good is it to talk about something without having access to it? If students witnessed an overdose on campus, how easily could they save someone's life? So, I began to think about the impact Narcan access could have on the UB community."

—Karina Germakovski, PharmD/MS '26

While she thought the experience was useful, she questioned afterward whether most students could afford the $50 over-the-counter price for Narcan or would know where to purchase it in advance of an emergency.

"I thought to myself: How good is it to talk about something without having access to it?" she says. "If students witnessed an overdose on campus, how easily could they save someone's life? So, I began to think about the impact Narcan access could have on the UB community."

While Germakovski was working on the UB initiative, someone close to her died of a drug overdose. The tragedy, she says, elevated the importance of her efforts.

With the support of pharmacy faculty and staff members John Dimura, pharmacy school facilities manager; Jennifer Rosenberg, PhD, associate dean for student success and engagement and director of admissions; Gene Morse, PharmD, SUNY Distinguished Professor of Pharmacy Practice and Germakovski's mentor; and Kristin Gniazdowski, senior assistant dean, finance and administration and unit business officer, Germakovski was able to make her dream of installing Narcan in the Pharmacy Building a reality.

Through research, meetings and many letters, Germakovski secured $20,000 in funding from the county health department, not only for the initial delivery of the Narcan kits but also for replenishment.

Germakovski notes that the work does not stop with installing the Narcan kits. She wants students to know how to administer the lifesaving drug, which, she says, is how harm reduction is accomplished.

Such efforts are already working in Erie County. In 2023, 366 people died from opioid overdoses. That number dropped to 274 in 2024, and from January through May 2025, there were 80 opioid-related deaths.

"The fatalities are decreasing," Germakovski says, "but we are still losing far too many lives."

As such, she has partnered with the health department to offer free Train the Trainer programs on campus. After completing the three-hour program, participants become certified to lead their own Narcan training programs in their communities.

She and her fellow APhA members held an event in October 2024 where more than 50 undergraduate and graduate students and faculty members became certified Narcan trainers.

"We hope to partner with the health department to offer more of these trainings in the future," she says. "Once students are trained, they can take that knowledge back to their communities, which may be New York City or a rural town. That's the beauty of spreading this education—that it can lead to sustainable change."

Qu and team make diabetes breakthrough in $3.5 million funded study

BY LAURIE KAISER

Jun Qu, PhD

The discovery by Jun Qu, PhD, and his team was featured as the cover story of Analytical Chemistry, a leading journal in analytical science, in September 2025.

Jun Qu, PhD, professor of pharmaceutical sciences, and researchers in his lab, have made a significant breakthrough in diagnosing and classifying Type 1 diabetes. They developed an advanced technology capable of detecting and measuring previously undetectable protein molecules at extremely low concentrations in the blood.

"Classifying, diagnosing and staging diabetes is crucial for disease management, but until now we lacked the tools to do so," says Qu, principal investigator of a four-year, $3.5 million study funded by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

"This new technique provides a much more accurate and specific picture of how insulin production is changing and how the functions of beta (β) cells in the pancreas become compromised at each stage of diabetes," Qu says. "It could help manage patients in the early stages of the disease and potentially slow down progression to full-blown diabetes."

An article detailing the discovery was featured as the cover story in a recent issue of Analytical Chemistry, a leading journal in analytical science. Primary authors are Qingqing Shen, a former UB doctoral student now at Bristol Myers Squibb, and Wang Cao, a UB graduate student in pharmaceutical sciences.

Qu notes that the technology may also be applicable to other diseases in which different forms of key proteins—known as proteoforms—carry important biological information.

A "holy grail" in the field

To achieve this breakthrough, Qu and his team devised an ultra-sensitive analytical method based on liquid chromatography–mass spectrometry (LC-MS), using a state-of-the-art mass spectrometer housed at the UB Proteomics and Bioanalysis Core in the University at Buffalo Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences.

With this technology, the team measured serum samples from 80 adolescents with molecular-level precision. They focused on different forms of proinsulin, the precursor molecule produced by the pancreas that is processed into insulin and C-peptide in circulation.

"For decades, scientists have recognized the importance of measuring circulating proinsulin and its intermediate forms to more effectively characterize diabetes," Qu says. "No one, however, had succeeded because of two major challenges: These molecules exist at extremely low, part-per-trillion levels in the blood, and the different forms of proinsulin differ by only a few amino acids, making them very difficult to distinguish.

"It has been almost a 'holy grail' in this field," he adds. "Everyone knew these measurements were important, but nobody could make them accurately, until now."

> "It has been almost a 'holy grail' in this field. Everyone knew these measurements were important, but nobody could make them accurately, until now."
>
> —*Jun Qu, PhD*

Revealing what previous tests missed

Using the new method, the team measured three primary proinsulin forms and C-peptide in serum from young participants divided into three groups: those at risk for Type 1 diabetes, those recently diagnosed and healthy controls.

The technology revealed clear distinctions between healthy and diabetic individuals that standard proinsulin tests failed to detect due to limited sensitivity and specificity.

"Accurately quantifying all three forms gives us a wealth of information about β-cell loss and helps us stage and phenotype the disease," Qu says. "Nobody has been able to achieve it before."

The method is now being used in longitudinal clinical studies and is already generating new insights.

Toward improved disease management

Qu says the research team is in the patent stage and hopes to translate the technology into broader clinical use.

"This process can help in the research and diagnosis not only of Type 1 diabetes but also Type 2 or other diseases involving β-cell dysfunction," Qu says. "In the future, we think that the knowledge acquired by this method will guide better strategies to manage diabetes before and after the onset of the disease. If we can delay or even halt the disease's progression, we significantly improve patients' quality of life."

Q&A: Examining evolving access to weight-loss medications

BY LAURIE KAISER

Nicole Albanese, PharmD

GLP-1 weight-loss medications such as Ozempic, Wegovy and Zepbound have reshaped conversations about obesity treatment, access and long-term care.

Nicole Albanese, PharmD, clinical professor of pharmacy practice in the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, has followed the evolving landscape surrounding these drugs—from supply and compounding practices to insurance coverage and the broader weight-loss industry.

As shortages ease and policy debates continue, questions remain about how these medications will be accessed, prescribed and sustained going forward.

Q: If the drug shortage has been rectified, does that mean less expensive, compounded versions will no longer exist? Advertisements for the drugs through online pharmacies continue to be aired.

A: This is correct. Compounding pharmacies are able to compound medications that are commercially available through a loophole in patent law that says when there is a "shortage" they can compound it. Additionally, you can compound a medication if it's not commercially available. So, it's possible that these drugs can continue to be compounded if they add other vitamins or minerals to it, making it different enough and not available commercially.

I've seen many of these semaglutide + Vitamin B12 products advertised. But Lilly, the company that makes tirzepatide (brand name Zepbound), is suing a few of these pharmacies. Soon, we will definitively know whether or not compounding pharmacies adding B12 can continue.

Q: The New York Times recently reported that President Trump wants to reverse former President Biden's proposal to require Medicare and Medicaid to cover weight-loss drugs as a way to treat the disease of obesity and its related conditions. The article also mentioned Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s criticism of weight-loss drugs, saying "they're inferior to consuming healthy food." Do you think the decision or opinion will lead to decreased desire or use of these drugs?

A: I don't think the opinions of Trump and Kennedy will decrease desire or use. Since neither Medicare nor Medicaid currently pays to treat obese or overweight patients with drugs like Saxenda or Zepbound, nothing will change. What will continue is patients who are obese and overweight trying to figure out how to get their hands on the diabetes-equivalent medications (Ozempic or Mounjaro), which then could cause shortages of those drugs in the future.

Also, many health maintenance organization (HMO) plans typically follow what the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) does. So, if Medicare continues not to pay for these drugs for obese and overweight patients, other insurance plans will also continue not to pay for them. There are 100 million Americans who are obese and another 213 million who are overweight. Since these drugs are so expensive, if we made them available to everyone who might qualify, these plans could go bankrupt. It's just not sustainable at these prices.

Q: WW International has historically focused on food tracking and in-person meetings as a slow, steady way to lose weight. The immense popularity of weight-loss drugs was cited among the reasons for the company's downfall. Do you see this as a trend that will continue with other traditional weight-loss programs?

A: I don't know if this would be a trend, especially if access to federal programs doesn't expand. Also, I feel like patients are not going to want to take these weight-loss drugs forever. While they may rely on them for a few years, they might eventually fall back to dieting and exercise to maintain. Then, programs such as WW will have a niche again.

LISTEN TO THE FULL CONVERSATION

Albanese discusses how GLP-1 medications work, why they have surged in popularity and what may prevent long-term success in an episode of UB's Driven to Discover podcast.

Scan the QR code or visit **bit.ly/albanese-weight-loss-drugs**

Study shows pharmacy students' views on mental illness can shift with education

BY LAURIE KAISER


Tammie Lee Demler, PharmD

Tammie Lee Demler, PharmD, a board-certified psychiatric pharmacist who works at a Buffalo inpatient psychiatric practice site, is all too familiar with the stigmas and misconceptions facing people with mental illness. It is an issue she is working to reduce.

She notes that it is her work with students at the University at Buffalo—in her roles as adjunct professor of pharmacy practice and psychiatric pharmacy residency director in the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and clinical associate professor of psychiatry in the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences—that motivates her to challenge discriminatory opinions among future health care professionals.

"As an educator, I feel compelled to reduce misconceptions and change attitudes among upcoming pharmacists and other health care professionals in training," says Demler.

To gauge perceptions of individuals diagnosed with severe mental illness, Demler has conducted studies of third-year pharmacy students enrolled in an ethics class. Most recently, she conducted one in 2024 with Claudia Lee, MD, a preceptor in the pharmacy program, and Kenny Nguyen, PharmD, a pharmacy resident, that focused specifically on perceptions of psychiatric inpatients' voting rights.

Their findings were published in Pharmacy Education, with Demler as lead author.

> "Our bottom line was that you can change your perception by just providing actual data and actual statistics, not your opinion."
>
> —*Tammie Lee Demler, PharmD*

Examining perceptions of voting rights

"We asked whether these patients should be encouraged to vote or allowed to vote if they lacked capacity. This is a term we use in psychiatry to determine whether or not you can make a decision," Demler explains. "More students in this class felt that the patients should have the right to vote but not be allowed to vote."

Students then completed a follow-up survey after Demler and the other presenters provided unbiased facts, including data showing that people with a mental illness are much more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of crime.

"Just 90 minutes later, after we had provided the data, we saw that student perceptions had changed favorably toward being less stigmatized," Demler says. "Our bottom line was that you can change your perception by just providing actual data and actual statistics, not your opinion. We were excited by the outcomes."

Specifically, 80% of students supported allowing psychiatric inpatients to vote, compared to 63% before the lecture. When asked more broadly whether individuals with mental illness should have the right to vote, affirmative responses increased from 88% to 96%.

Building on earlier research

"When I say 'mental illness,' people go right to the most severe versions, such as schizophrenia. However, the number of people with anxiety and depression is tremendously higher, and this has been especially true since COVID," Demler says.

The 2024 study stemmed from surveys Demler conducted with pharmacy students in 2021 and 2022, which gauged perceptions of the rights of people diagnosed with a mental illness.

"The questions focused on general hot topics—whether people with mental illness should have the right to refuse medications and vaccines, engage in sexual relationships, and own a gun post-hospitalization," Demler explains. "Afterwards, we gave a lecture on 17 key messages related to mental illness and surveyed the students again."

Students' perceptions improved in every category except one—whether individuals with severe mental illness have the right to vote. Most of the students said no.

"We hadn't even talked about it," Demler explains. "We thought this was very interesting, and we wanted to dig into it further."

Reducing stigma in health care

Changing perceptions of the capacities and rights of people with mental illness is important, Demler says, because negative interactions with health care providers and others can diminish their chances of effective treatment. This comes at a time when more people across the United States report fewer social connections and greater isolation and loneliness—conditions linked to mental and physical harms, including suicide.

"Evidence shows that social connection is among the most powerful protective factors against suicide, regardless of whether an individual has a diagnosed mental health condition," she says, adding, "Empowering individuals with mental illness to engage in civic duties, such as voting, can foster inclusion and self-worth."

Demler hopes similar studies will be replicated in other health profession programs.

"My hope is that I've imprinted on students that even the smallest interaction with somebody with a mental illness should be respectful," she says. "We want our students to be more patient and understanding because that one interaction with someone could determine whether or not they continue in their efforts to be well. As health care professionals, we want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem."

Expanding access to injectable contraception

BY LAURIE KAISER

Nicole Cieri-Hutcherson, PharmD

Approximately 19 million U.S. women of childbearing age reside in what are known as "contraceptive deserts" due to geographic, political, economic and social barriers to birth control.

"This means the local community pharmacy may be the closest or only way for women in these areas to obtain birth control," noted Nicole Cieri-Hutcherson, PharmD, clinical associate professor of pharmacy practice at the University at Buffalo School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences.*

Cieri-Hutcherson and a small research team recently conducted a systematic review examining attitudes toward pharmacist-administered injectable contraception.

The team discovered that most pharmacists, providers and patients considered the injectable birth control option, which has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, beneficial. Their findings were published in the Journal of the American Pharmacists Association in February 2025.

Many states already allow the practice

Currently, women in New York State can get the self-administered pill, patch and ring contraceptives at their local pharmacy but not the pharmacist-administered injectable contraceptive, which lasts for three months.

The New York State Assembly is currently considering allowing pharmacists to administer injectable contraceptives in community pharmacies. The New York State Senate has already approved the practice, which is similar to pharmacist-administered vaccines. It does not require a physician's exam or prescription.

Since 2016, almost half the states in the U.S., as well as Washington, D.C., have approved legislation greenlighting pharmacist provision of certain contraceptive forms, including the ring, pill and patch—and in 10 states, injectable contraception.

"The role of pharmacists in reproductive health and contraception management continues to expand," Cieri-Hutcherson said. "Allowing pharmacists to administer injectable contraception in New York would benefit patients, while aligning with pharmacists' capabilities and professional roles."

A convenient birth control option

While oral hormonal contraceptives remain the most common form of birth control, just 7.5% of women of childbearing age worldwide use an injectable contraceptive.

Cieri-Hutcherson predicts the injectables may gain in popularity over time, considering their longevity and convenience with no daily pill to remember to take.

"I envision it as a good option for women throughout their reproductive years," she said. "It's convenient for busy women who can get their three-month dose of birth control while shopping at their local supermarket. It's also appealing to adolescents who may want a confidential and discrete type of birth control."

> "Allowing pharmacists to administer injectable contraception in New York would benefit patients, while aligning with pharmacists' capabilities and professional roles."
>
> —*Nicole Cieri-Hutcherson, PharmD*

Further findings in the review

While the study revealed that most pharmacists felt confident and capable of administering the injectable contraceptives, some expressed the need for further training and resources.

"As far as training goes, we want to tell pharmacists that it's not that different from evaluating for contraindications to and administering a vaccine," she said.

While health care providers included in the systematic review supported pharmacist provision of injectable contraception, some expressed concern that if patients don't come to their office for contraceptives, they won't come for well visits such as cervical cancer screenings or mammograms—services that are often bundled with contraceptive care.

"Evidence shows that more accessible models are not steering patients away from preventative health screenings," Cieri-Hutcherson said, pointing to data from California and Oregon showing that almost 90% of women who used pharmacy contraceptive services had visited their primary care provider within the last year.

"But overall," she said, "this is an important opportunity to increase access to reproductive health care."

*Editor's note: Since publication of this study, Cieri-Hutcherson has accepted a position as senior clinical content consultant pharmacist in women's health at Wolters Kluwer and will remain affiliated with UB SPPS as an adjunct associate professor.

Pharmacy school AI lab evolving to improve drug development, advance clinical research

BY LAURIE KAISER

Murali Ramanathan, PhD

Murali Ramanathan, PhD, has used artificial intelligence (AI) since its nascent days while exploring possible treatments for multiple sclerosis (MS) and Alzheimer's disease.

Today, Ramanathan, professor of pharmaceutical sciences in the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, is expanding his use of AI to analyze complex biomedical data to improve drug development for many diseases, though MS remains the heart of his focus.

Much of his work takes place in the Laboratory for Artificial Intelligence and Clinical Pharmacology, where Ramanathan and his interdisciplinary team apply AI, deep learning, large language models, pharmacometrics and advanced analytics to real-world health care and biomedical data.

Affiliated with the UB Institute for Artificial Intelligence and Data Science, the lab supports collaboration across disciplines, allowing researchers to tackle complex problems in medicine and drug development.

"Our lab brings together experts in disciplines such as neurology and radiology, engineering, computer science and statistics," Ramanathan says. "This cross-collaboration of skills helps us to tackle complex problems that no one single discipline could solve alone."

Ramanathan has six researchers working with him on various AI and drug development projects.

"With AI, researchers can analyze huge amounts of data very quickly," he says. "This helps us identify patterns and predict how someone's MS might progress, for instance, or how they might respond to certain medications.

"I work on diseases that have a great level of uncertainty and complexity, and they require large amounts of data," he says. "AI is better suited to work on challenges like that."

Multiple disciplines use lab

Graduate students working in Ramanathan's lab focus on different aspects of AI. For example, a neuroscience student is examining how AI methods can be used for MS treatment, while a data sciences student is developing new AI methods and user interfaces. Pharmacy sciences students are using AI to solve problems in pharmacometrics, pharmacy counseling and disease-progression modeling.

"We want to be able to develop methods that are reliable, predictable, robust and effective," Ramanathan says.

Drug development involves taking a chemical entity, whether it is a protein or a small molecule, and turning it into a product that can be administered to patients.

"What AI can help us do is match the molecule to the disease and make sure the patients get the right drug and the right dose at the right time," he says. "While our capacity to generate and synthesize new drugs has grown significantly, you can't carry too many drugs into trials. You have to make decisions along the way and eventually reduce it to one drug to submit. AI could have a huge impact in enabling better decision-making."

Gates Foundation grant

For the past year, Ramanathan has been working under a $275,000 grant from the Gates Foundation to develop protocols for clinical trials.

One of the world's largest sponsors of clinical trials, the Gates Foundation focuses on diseases affecting developing countries, including tuberculosis, malaria, HIV, and maternal health and child health illnesses. Its clinicians need a detailed roadmap before starting trials, Ramanathan explained.

"This is like a construction diagram with a lot of details about how a typical trial can run," he says. "We are helping define where they are going with the trial, what they're going to do with each patient, what data they're going to connect and how it's going to be meaningful."

Ramanathan and his team are using public-domain data along with data provided by collaborators at the Gates Foundation and elsewhere.

"I hope we'll be able to extend the grant further and do new things," he says. "So far, it's been a very positive experience working with the foundation. It has opened up avenues for us."

Using AI to predict and prevent cardiac hospital readmissions

BY LAURIE KAISER

Arinze Okere, PharmD, MS, MBA

When Arinze Nkemdirim Okere, PharmD, MS, MBA, worked as a pharmacist at a hospital in Tallahassee, Florida, he noticed that discharged patients would regularly return—often for issues that could have been easily treated.

"The reasons behind hospital readmissions are multifactorial," says Okere, who joined SPPS as a clinical professor of pharmacy practice and head of the Division of Outcomes and Practice Advancement in September 2025.

"One big factor is medication adherence issues," he says. "This is especially true among patients with cardiovascular disease."

Readmission can be costly for both the patient and the hospital and can put vulnerable patients at risk for infections and even death, Okere adds.

Seeking ways to prevent unnecessary readmissions, Okere worked with a small team of researchers from July 2021 to December 2022 to develop a machine-learning model—an artificial intelligence (AI) approach—capable of predicting hospital readmissions within 90 days with 95% accuracy.

Their findings were published in the December 2025 issue of BMJ Health & Care Informatics.

Co-authors include Md. Mohaimenul Islam, PhD, MS, research assistant professor in UB's Department of Pharmacy Practice, along with researchers from the University of Florida and Florida A&M University, where Okere previously taught.

Identifying risk through patient-reported data

Existing tools for predicting hospitalization largely rely on retrospective clinical data, identifying risk only after adverse events occur. Okere and his team took a different approach.

By integrating patient-reported behavioral data into electronic health records, their AI model was able to identify individuals at higher risk of rehospitalization early.

Recruiting participants from community pharmacies, outpatient clinics and social media platforms, the team surveyed more than 1,300 adults nationwide with at least one cardiovascular risk factor, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol or Type 2 diabetes.

Using the survey data, AI identified both linear and nonlinear patterns tied to the participants' risk of returning to the hospital within 90 days, Okere explains.

Among participants, 35% reported at least one hospitalization and 10.4% reported a 90-day readmission. Heart disease, multiple medications, race and ethnicity, employment and insurance status were among the most influential predictors of who would return within that three-month timeframe.

Why patients return

Several factors can contribute to readmissions among patients with cardiovascular risk, including medication allergies, missed doses, adverse drug interactions and misunderstanding how to properly take medications.

For example, some patients who should have been taking medications shown to reduce the risk of rehospitalization associated with heart failure were not prescribed those medications, Okere notes.

"I have seen this mostly among patients living in underserved communities and ones who do not have a primary care physician," he says.

Adverse drug interactions—particularly among older adults with multiple chronic conditions—can trigger hypertension, renal dysfunction, arrhythmias or bleeding, all common causes of readmission. Poor medication reconciliation during transitions of care can also lead to omissions, duplications or inappropriate continuation of high-risk medications.

"I recall a patient discharged on an appropriate antibiotic therapy for pneumonia who continued to experience shortness of breath," he says. "During a follow-up transition-of-care call, I identified a history of mild COPD and promptly collaborated with the physician to initiate oral prednisone. This intervention prevented an unnecessary clinic visit or hospital admission."

Misunderstanding how to take medications correctly is another common issue.

"In an earlier study, we realized that some patients didn't understand that you can't just take a medication until you feel better and then stop," he says. "They are more likely to be adherent if they understand that not taking the medication can lead to problems. And once they understood how to properly take their medications, they were less likely to go back to the hospital."

Moving toward real-world implementation

"AI has the potential to help identify high-risk patients and prompt timely, targeted interventions to prevent adverse drug events and avoidable readmissions," Okere says. "My team and I are making progress toward developing an AI-enabled approach to support this goal, and we plan to establish broader collaborations to bring this work to fruition."

Okere, who also serves on the adjunct faculty at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, hopes to collaborate with hospitals in Buffalo to identify patients at highest risk of readmission.

"Being new to Buffalo, I'm trying to build relationships where we can try to implement what we've done and test it using their own electronic system," he says. "We are hoping that physicians, and even the nursing assistants and triage nurses, can use this AI system to quickly flag a patient who might be at risk of being readmitted. We want to actively be involved in those patients' care for better outcomes in the short and long term."

Q&A: Addressing myths and misinformation about childhood vaccines

BY LAURIE KAISER

Childhood vaccines developed in the 20th century have saved more than 154 million lives, according to a 2024 study led by the World Health Organization. Immunization remains one of the most effective public health interventions, protecting infants and children from diseases that once caused widespread illness and death.

Yet questions about safety, scheduling and long-term effects persist. Between shifting federal recommendations and misinformation amplified through social media, separating fact from fiction can be challenging for parents.

William Prescott, PharmD, chair and clinical professor in the Department of Pharmacy Practice, is a pediatric pharmacist with expertise in vaccinations and vaccine hesitancy. He addresses common concerns and explains why vaccination remains critical to protecting children and communities.

William Prescott, PharmD

Q: What would you most like parents to know about childhood vaccines as they navigate conflicting information?

A: When you read or hear something about vaccines that concerns you, be it on the news or on social media, don't hesitate to seek the opinion of a health professional you trust. Even when reports are based on published work, the quality of research is sometimes underwhelming which, when taken at face value, can lead to misinterpretation. That's why we're here—to help our patients make informed decisions about their medical care, including vaccination.

Bottom line: Parents want what is best for their kids. Our kids are at risk for the diseases that vaccines prevent. These diseases are serious, and vaccines have a proven record of being both safe and effective. Vaccines save lives, period. They might save your kid's life.

Q: Some parents have requested schedules that space out the vaccines that their infants and young children receive. This differs from the vaccine schedules recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. What are your thoughts?

A: Staggering vaccines is a bad idea. Whenever you delay vaccination, you increase the time that children are susceptible to serious diseases, diseases that can cause hospitalization, long-term complications and even death.

Parents may be concerned that giving multiple vaccines at once will overload their child's immune system, but this claim is unfounded. The antigens, or remnants of the disease-causing particle that are recognized by the immune system, which make up vaccines, constitute a small fraction of what our bodies naturally encounter every day. Interestingly, even though children today receive more vaccines than children in the '80s and '90s did, the antigenic load is less because of changes that have been made to vaccines to improve their safety.

Q: What would you say to a parent who fears that vaccines cause autism?

A: The supposed connection between vaccines, MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) in particular, and autism spectrum disorder, have affected vaccine acceptance for decades. This dates to a small, fabricated study published in 1998 that was later retracted, with the author stripped of his credentials. Fast forward to 2025 and the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services cited an article published in a pseudoscience journal by previously discredited researchers that made similar claims. These are good examples of how disinformation can negatively impact public health.

If a parent is open to having a conversation, I would express understanding of their perspective and convey to them that there have been many well-designed studies published in highly reputable journals that have disproven a correlation between autism and vaccines, and that all medical societies support that vaccines do not cause autism. Knowing this, I vaccinated my kids. Many parents are not going to change their minds after one conversation, so patience is key.

Q: Will declining vaccination rates lead to a decline in herd immunity?

A: There is no question that declining vaccination rates will lessen herd immunity. This puts people at risk—infants who are too young to be vaccinated, those who cannot be vaccinated due to medical reasons, and those with compromised immune systems.

Sometimes we forget about how common and serious vaccine preventable diseases were before we had effective vaccines. Most vaccine-preventable diseases are still endemic to the U.S. Even those infections that are not endemic, such as measles and polio, are just a plane ride away. We see this every year with measles, which easily infiltrates communities with low vaccination rates. The latest data indicate that the last five kindergarten cohorts had less than a 95% vaccination rate against measles, below the herd immunity threshold. This should concern us immensely.

Q: How can pediatricians and pharmacists work together to ensure more children receive the vaccines they need?

A: Educating parents on the importance of vaccination is a shared responsibility among all health professionals, including physicians and pharmacists. When we work together to dispel the myths and misconceptions about vaccines and stress the relevance and seriousness of vaccine-preventable diseases, it not only increases the number of times parents hear this message but also builds much needed trust in the health care system.

2025 Pharmacy Summer Institute graduates.

Celebrating a decade of inspiring future leaders at Pharmacy Summer Institute

BY SAMANTHA NEBELECKY

The School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences proudly celebrated a milestone last summer with the tenth annual Pharmacy Summer Institute (PSI), held July 14-16. This annual enrichment program brings high school and college students from around the world to campus to explore pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences through immersive learning experiences.

Building pathways to pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences

In its first ten years, PSI introduced more than 1,000 students to pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences, sparking career ambitions and opening doors to academic and professional success. Many PSI alumni have gone on to enroll in top programs—including UB SPPS—and are now recognized leaders in health care, research and patient care.

"Over the past decade, UB SPPS has been honored to host more than 1,000 students through one of the premier pharmacy summer programs in the country," says Jennifer Rosenberg, PhD, associate dean for student success and engagement. "Each year, we incorporate student feedback to enhance the institute, ensuring that every program offers relevant workshops and meaningful experiences. We look forward to continuing to welcome aspiring leaders in pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences in the years ahead."

Highlights from PSI 2025

The 2025 program welcomed 68 students from nine U.S. states, Puerto Rico and Switzerland. Students participated in hands-on activities, interactive sessions and engaging lectures led by SPPS faculty, alumni, students and local health care professionals.

> "During my experience attending PSI in 2023, I gained many meaningful experiences that ultimately led me to commit to UB Pharmacy. PSI has a degree of faculty and student engagement that was incomparable to some of the other schools I was considering, and that is one of the reasons I was excited to contribute my experience and insight as a student leader for PSI 2025."
>
> *—Daniyal Atiq, PharmD/MS '28, 2025 PSI Co-Chair, Advisory Committee Member*

Programming spanned multiple locations, including UB's South, Downtown and North campuses, as well as the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus. Experiences included patient counseling simulations, mock vaccine administration and exploring the role of interprofessional collaboration in health care.

PSI 2025 was organized by Tyler Bingham, assistant director for recruitment and advisement, and co-led by the PSI Student Leadership Team, composed of UB PharmD students, several of whom are PSI alumni. The PSI Student Leadership Team guided participants through workshops and activities, provided peer mentorship, and helped create a dynamic, welcoming experience that reflects PSI's mission to foster discovery, learning and career exploration in pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences.

Pharmacy students broaden global perspectives through international health experiences

Selvi Chhabra, PharmD/MBA '25 (left, in purple), distributing supplies to patients at a health clinic in Ghana.

BY SAMANTHA NEBELECKY

For several UB PharmD students, traveling abroad in 2025 offered more than clinical practice—it provided perspective, connection and a deeper understanding of patient-centered care across cultures.

"I was given the chance to see how health care systems operate in other parts of the world and how much we have to learn from each other," says Tyler Leote, PharmD '27. "I was deeply impacted by the sense of community and the dedication to care for patients, despite resource and technological limitations," Leote adds, reflecting on a trip to Jamaica in March 2025.

During winter and spring breaks last year, UB PharmD students participated in multiple short-term global health experiences, bringing essential health care services to underserved communities in Ghana, Belize and Jamaica through SPPS' Global Health Initiatives program. The immersive trips are an annual collaboration among UB's health sciences schools, giving students hands-on clinical experience while emphasizing the importance of interprofessional teamwork in patient care.

In January 2025, pharmacy students traveled to Ghana alongside students from the UB schools of management and medicine to provide services including malaria and blood glucose testing, eye exams, primary care and preventive care in communities in Kumasi and Accra. That same month, another group of pharmacy students traveled to Belize with the UB School of Nursing to assist with glucose and blood pressure screenings, urgent and subacute assessment, medication dispensing and health education in the Orange Walk and Yo Creek communities.

L-R: Tyler Leote, PharmD '27, Dimah Alani, PharmD '27, Sumin Kim, PharmD '27, and Nathan Briselden, PharmD '26, organizing medications and supplies at a health clinic in Jamaica.

"Working in an interprofessional team, I witnessed firsthand how effective collaboration between pharmacists, physicians and other health care professionals like nurses and social workers can optimize patient outcomes," says Selvi Chhabra, PharmD/MBA '25. "Collaborating with local health care providers and professionals from UB enhanced my understanding of effective teamwork, strengthened my communication skills and solidified my passion for improving patient care in diverse settings," she adds, reflecting on her experience in Ghana.

Together, these global experiences helped pharmacy students build clinical confidence, cultural awareness and a deeper appreciation for teamwork—skills that will shape their approach to patient care throughout their careers.

PharmD students working to reduce illness, increase immunizations in partnership with Tops Markets

L-R: Fateema Islam, PharmD '28 and Hamdala Fousseni, PharmD '28, volunteering at Tops Pharmacy on Amherst and Grant Street as part of Wellness Wednesdays.

BY LAURIE KAISER

If you walk into certain Tops pharmacies on a Wednesday afternoon, you may spot a UB PharmD student talking to customers about immunizations, screening for high blood pressure and prediabetes or making referrals to smoking cessation programs.

It's part of Wellness Wednesdays, a service-learning requirement for third-year pharmacy students at SPPS. Now in its second year, the program provides health care education and services to customers, especially in Buffalo neighborhoods where chronic illnesses are more prevalent.

"We thought this would be a great way to ensure all of our students have been in a community pharmacy before they get to their last year in the program and expose them to what a community pharmacy can do," says Gina Prescott, PharmD, clinical professor of pharmacy practice and director of global and community outreach at SPPS. "We're also trying to reach patients in areas where a customer's contact point with their pharmacy or grocery store may be their only avenue for health care."

> "We really want them out in the community, so they get a good understanding of what those public health issues are and how to address them as a pharmacist."
>
> *—Gina Prescott, PharmD, director of SPPS Global and Community Outreach*

Prescott spearheaded the program with Jamie Keller, PharmD '11, pharmacy clinical programs manager for Tops Markets and an adjunct assistant professor of pharmacy practice at SPPS.

So far, 103 students have completed the service-learning program, and 126 are participating this academic year.

Over the past year, Prescott says they've seen significant progress in students' understanding of the importance of pharmacists' work in these stores, and students have reported enjoying the experience. She notes this comes at a time when trust in the medical profession, particularly regarding vaccines, has diminished due to misinformation disseminated largely through social media. The community pharmacy work complements a class students take beforehand that addresses public health issues.

"We really want them out in the community, so they get a good understanding of what those public health issues are and how to address them as a pharmacist," Prescott says. "We tell students no matter where you practice, you're going to have to address this on some level because there's just so much misinformation out there."

PHARMACY STUDENTS SUPPORT COMMUNITY CARE AT LIGHTHOUSE MEDICAL CLINIC

BY LAURIE KAISER

UB PharmD students are expanding their clinical experience while serving the local community and supporting UB's outreach efforts at the Lighthouse Free Medical Clinic in Buffalo.

Beginning last May, third-year pharmacy students joined peers from UB's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences and the School of Public Health and Health Professions as volunteers at Lighthouse, which provides free medical care every Friday evening to uninsured and underinsured adults and children in the community.

"We decided that this would be a great professional yearlong service-learning opportunity for our third-year students because they're closest to rotation to an interprofessional clinic," says Gina Prescott, PharmD, clinical professor of pharmacy practice and director of global and community outreach at SPPS. "It's a nice, short-term exposure to interprofessional relationships in the clinical setting and part of our strategic plan and mission to provide care to underserved populations."

During a shift last May, Ryan Ni, PharmD '27, worked with fellow students to provide medication counseling, identify low-cost generic options for medications and assist the medical team with patient assessments and medication reconciliation.

"My experience gave me the chance to apply what I've learned in class to real patient care and strengthened my drive to serve communities in need," Ni says. "I learned that quality care is more than clinical knowledge. It depends on trust, listening and meeting patients where they are. That lesson will stay with me throughout my career."

Every third-year pharmacy student works at least one Friday night shift alongside medical students, supervised by at least one faculty member, as well as licensed medical doctors and pharmacists.

"Lighthouse directly serves our neighboring Buffalo community, which is a very important goal for UB," says Kalpesh Desai, PharmD, assistant dean for inclusive excellence at SPPS. "Everyone involved is learning how to provide health care as a team and learn from each other's training to fulfill the immediate health care needs of patients ... My main hope is that pharmacy students with this invaluable experience will be inspired to 'pay it forward' when they graduate and serve their communities where they work and live. When a patient with limited resources who is struggling with their health is so grateful for your free service, it is truly the most uplifting, rewarding experience."

L-R: Tyler Leote, PharmD '27, Gina Prescott, PharmD, director of SPPS Global and Community Outreach, Adia Vazquez, PharmD '27, and Ryan Ni, PharmD '27.

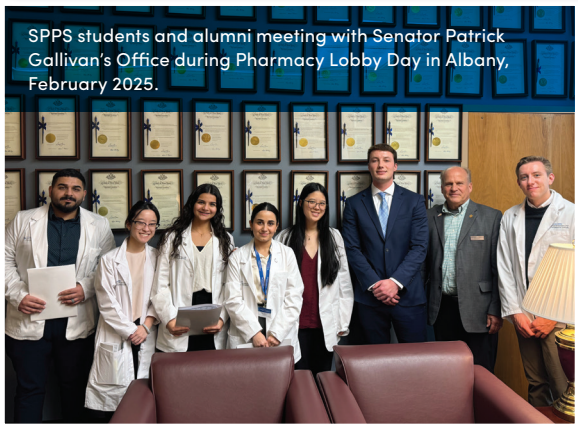
From the classroom to the capital: pharmacy students champion the profession

BY SAMANTHA NEBELECKY

Legislators speaking with SPPS students at PLAID Day, hosted at the Pharmacy Building in November 2025.

SPPS students meeting with Assemblymember Phil Steck during Pharmacy Lobby Day in Albany, February 2025.

PLAID Day organizers pictured at the Pharmacy Building, November 2025.



SPPS students and alumni meeting with Senator Patrick Gallivan's Office during Pharmacy Lobby Day in Albany, February 2025.

UB PharmD students are helping shape the future of pharmacy through coordinated advocacy efforts with local and state lawmakers. Under the leadership of Karl Williams, JD, MBA, BS '80, the school's inaugural director of legislative advocacy, students are gaining firsthand experience engaging policymakers on issues critical to patient care and the pharmacy profession.

In February 2025, a group of UB PharmD students traveled to Albany for Pharmacy Lobby Day. The annual event brings PharmD students and pharmacy professionals together with state legislators to discuss issues impacting the profession, and to advocate for policies that support high-quality care for New York state residents. Organized by the Student Pharmacists Association of Western New York (SPAWNY) and SPPS' student chapter of the Pharmacists Society of the State of New York, the visit focused on legislative priorities including a reimbursement floor in commercial space, pharmacy technician reform and expanded point of care testing—efforts aimed at strengthening the profession and enhancing patient access to care statewide.

"Pharmacy Lobby Day is a critical event that highlights the importance of advocacy in shaping health care policy and protecting both pharmacists and patients," says Mohamad Ghazi, PharmD '27, SPAWNY president. "Our goal through this advocacy is to drive meaningful changes that lead to better patient outcomes and a stronger pharmacy profession."

In November 2025, SPAWNY hosted the annual Pharmacy Legislative Advocacy Invitational Day (PLAID), inviting regional legislators to the Pharmacy Building for in-depth discussions with students on health care legislation and pharmacy practice. Students addressed issues such as pharmacy access and patient advocacy along with expanded point-of-care testing.

"PLAID Day is an annual event led by SPAWNY that demonstrates the significance and importance of pharmacy advocacy for our career," said Carol Botros, PharmD '28, SPAWNY vice president. "It pieces together the role of working alongside legislators as pharmacists to effectively communicate the need for change."

Through these advocacy initiatives, UB PharmD students are developing the skills and confidence to serve as effective advocates for their patients, their profession and the future of pharmacy practice.

Learning and Engagement Communities foster connection and professional growth

BY LAURIE KAISER

The SPPS Learning and Engagement Communities (LECs) continued to take shape this year, giving pharmacy students opportunities for mentoring, professional development and connection outside the classroom. Through house activities, roundtable discussions and social events, students have shared accomplishments, explored career paths and learned from both peers and faculty.

Established in 2023 by the SPPS Office of Student Success and Engagement, LECs were created in response to a student survey revealing a desire for increased support beyond the classroom. "We realized there was a lack of connection and belonging, both peer to peer and peer to faculty," says Niki Pizzutelli, director of student success and engagement. "Addressing this issue head on with interpersonal support felt like a social responsibility. LECs can support stronger connections, and maybe even improved alumni connections for the future so that students have that lasting connection to the school and to the faculty."

Although students don't reside together in physical houses, they receive a plethora of support through the six LEC houses—Legacy, Advocacy, Virtue, Humanity, Integrity and Equity—named for core tenets of the Oath of a Pharmacist. Each house is overseen by a chief student leader, additional student leaders, two faculty leaders and a team of faculty and staff champions. Chief student leaders organize house activities, coordinate larger LEC events and serve as primary contacts for members.

Through the LECs, students discuss career opportunities in industry, academia and community pharmacy, exchange tips on fellowships and networking, and find ways to get involved at the school. Roundtable discussions, held each semester, foster self-awareness, reflection, strategic goal setting and allow students to receive guidance from faculty and peers.

Since their launch, LECs have strengthened connections across the student body and with faculty. "It's a huge benefit for them to see each other in person and for the students to see that collegiality," Pizzutelli says. "It creates a friendly, open vibe, which is one thing we're hoping to achieve."

Pharmacy Learning and Engagement Community (LEC) groups meet for a series of roundtable discussions in Harriman Hall in March 2025.

Kawa, PharmD '27, elected national president-elect, APhA-ASP

BY SAMANTHA NEBELECKY

Sean Kawa, PharmD '27, was elected national president-elect of the American Pharmacists Association Academy of Student Pharmacists (APhA-ASP) for the 2025-26 term.

In this national leadership role, Kawa will represent and advocate for student pharmacists across the country, working to inform and empower APhA-ASP members. He will collaborate with other elected officers to evaluate and strengthen the organization's structure, with a focus on ensuring that resources are effectively aligned to support student pharmacist development.

Sean Kawa, PharmD '27

Kawa's responsibilities will also include outreach visits to schools and colleges of pharmacy nationwide to gather student perspectives and help elevate student voices within the organization. This summer, he will spend time in Washington, D.C., participating in an internship that provides firsthand insight into the operations of APhA and other professional health care organizations.

"My hope is to utilize the reach of this role and its accompanying resources to constructively influence student pharmacists across the country," says Kawa. "There is no doubt that we find ourselves in a particularly tumultuous time in this profession. To provide meaningful direction that creates commitment to this field and to create opportunities for students to expand their community impact would be an experience fulfilled."

Kawa brings significant leadership experience to the role. He previously served as a regional delegate for APhA-ASP Region 1, currently serves as the policy vice president of the SPPS chapter of APhA-ASP and is president of the UB PharmD Class of 2027.

Student Accomplishments

Dedication and curiosity drive success. We're proud to highlight the achievements of our students and recent graduates over the past year, along with the collaboration and support that make these milestones possible. Here are some of this year's outstanding student accomplishments.

Karina Germakovski, PharmD/MS '26, winner of the 2025 New York State Council of Health-system Pharmacists Corporate Scholarship Essay Award.

Nicole Kayrala, PharmD '26, named a Research Abstract Finalist at the 2025 Pediatric Pharmacy Association Annual Meeting for her poster, "Drug-Induced Liver Injury in Neonates and Infants: Real World Electronic Health Records Reveal Elevated Incidence of Adverse Drug Reactions and Increased Mortality Risk."

Mfonabasi Ette, PharmD, RPh, PhD '25, selected for the Scholar Mentoring and Development Program, a competitive career mentoring program designed to prepare postbaccalaureate and graduate students for industry career paths in biotechnology, consumer health care and medical technology companies.

Brent Boleslav, MS, PhD student in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, named one of the first-ever recipients of the American College of Clinical Pharmacology Grant Program, providing funding support for the next generation of clinical pharmacologists conducting innovative human-based research.

Thomas Nguyen, PharmD/MS '23, PhD student in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, received a Clinical Research Loan Repayment Program Award from the National Institutes of Health, providing funding support and fostering long-term research carers for early-career clinician-scientists conducting patient-oriented or translational research.




Lauren Weydig, PharmD '28, Cecilia Mak, PharmD '28, Carson Spina, PharmD '28 and **Alexandra Yick, PharmD '28 (left to right),** a team representing the SPPS chapter of the National Community Pharmacists Association (NCPA), named a top 10 national finalist in the 2025 Good Neighbor Pharmacy NCPA Pruitt-Schutte Student Business Plan Competition.

The SPPS chapter of the American Pharmacists Association Academy of Student Pharmacists received Region 1 awards for Operation Heart and Operation Immunization, selected from 17 pharmacy schools in the region. The chapter is a 14-time winner for Operation Heart and three-time winner for Operation Immunization.

Xintian Wu, PharmD '26, awarded a 2025 Academy of Managed Care Pharmacy Northeast Nexus Scholarship, one of four student pharmacists from the Northeast region to receive the award.


Patrick Mueller, PharmD '26 (left), and Jian Dong, PharmD '26 (right) winners of 2025 Local Level of the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Clinical Skills Competition, in partnership with the SPPS Student Society of Health-System Pharmacists.

Aaliyah Sims, PharmD '28, awarded a 2025 CVS Health/American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy Community Pharmacy Award for Student Pharmacists, one of 21 student pharmacists selected nationwide.

Amruta Gajanan Bhat, MS, PhD student in data sciences in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, awarded a 2025 Trainee Challenge Award on Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Clinical and Translational Science, presented jointly by the PhRMA Foundation and the American Society for Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics.

Kaitlyn Vu, PharmD '27, first-place winner of the SPPS American Pharmacists Association Academy of Student Pharmacists Annual Patient Counseling Competition.

Sandra Lu, PharmD '28, second-place winner of the SPPS American Pharmacists Association Academy of Student Pharmacists Annual Patient Counseling Competition.

Incoming PhD scholars recognized with prestigious fellowships

BY KATIE BRIGHAM

This year's incoming PhD students in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences and the Division of Clinical and Translational Therapeutics have earned top university honors and competitive national fellowships, underscoring SPPS' reputation as a leader in drug discovery, development, biotherapeutics, translational science and novel delivery systems.

"Our programs have long been recognized for preparing the next generation of scientists," says Gary Pollack, PhD, dean, SPPS. "These awards reflect both the caliber of students we are fortunate to recruit and the strong institutional commitment to fostering their success."

Emma Evereth, a PhD student in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, received a UB Presidential Fellowship, awarded annually to the top 10% of enrolled doctoral students. She was also named a UB Graduate School Fellow and received a National Institutes of Health (NIH) T32-Initiative for Maximizing Student Development at UB (IMSD@UB) scholarship.

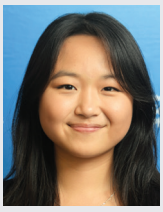
"I am honored to be a NIH T32-IMSD Scholar, as well as the recipient of the UB Presidential Fellowship and Graduate School Fellowship. I am eager to use these awards to jumpstart my career as a young scientist and explore the groundbreaking research conducted at UB. I look forward to combining my background in neuroscience and chemistry with the new concepts I learn to make strides in drug delivery and bioengineering." —Emma Evereth

Daniyal Atiq, PharmD/MS '28, a student in the Clinical and Translational Therapeutics program in the Department of Pharmacy Practice, received an NIH Short-Term Institutional Research Training Grant. The grant supports health professions students by providing early exposure to academic and translational research careers. Atiq was selected as one of only two PharmD students for the 2025 NIH-funded T35 cohort.

"Receiving the NIH T35 fellowship was an amazing opportunity since it allowed me to explore my interest in clinical and translational science, through research revolving around fungal and multidrug-resistant pathogens. I am excited to build on this foundation within the highly collaborative environment at UB SPPS as I work toward my PharmD/MS and learn what I can achieve as a scientist." —Daniyal Atiq

Curtis Changjun Chen, Claire Gao, Nicole Tran and Laura Weinstein, PhD students within the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, received UB Graduate School Fellowships, which provide up to $50,000 in funding for outstanding graduate students. Weinstein also received a T32-IMSD@UB scholarship. In addition, Gao and Tran were awarded Fung Laboratory Graduate Fellowships, which support high-impact research in pharmaceutical sciences within the Fung Laboratory's mentored research environment at SPPS.

"I am extremely thankful to receive this award, and I am excited for the opportunity to attend this institution. I hope to learn more about the field of pharmaceutical sciences and to gain more experience in both research and industrial settings, and I'm looking forward to the chance to bridge my engineering background with the field of pharmaceuticals." —Curtis Changjun Chen



"I am incredibly grateful for the generous support of the UB Graduate School and the Fung Laboratory Fellowships. I am very excited to pursue my passion for developing therapies that can make a meaningful impact on patients' lives. I look forward to growing into a thoughtful and skilled scientist, while fostering a collaborative and motivating environment for my peers." —Claire Gao

"I am deeply grateful for the support of the UB Graduate School and the Fung Laboratory Fellowships. The research environment at UB has been exceptionally welcoming, and I look forward to continuing to learn and grow as I pursue my research interests in drug development and pharmaceutical sciences." —Nicole Tran

"I'm really grateful for the recognition I've received, and for the mentors and peers who have guided me along the way. As I start my PhD at UB, I'm excited to dive into research on nanomedicine while also giving back to the community that's supported me. I hope to create a collaborative, encouraging environment where my peers and I can grow and succeed together." —Laura Weinstein

A welcome return: Alumni Reunion Celebration 2025

After a brief pause, our graduates returned to campus on September 26–27, 2025, for a weekend of connection, reflection and celebration during the Alumni Reunion Celebration.

The weekend began with a welcome dinner at the Terrace at Delaware Park, where milestone reunion classes—those marking years ending in 0 or 5—were honored alongside members of the Gregory Society in recognition of their generosity and continued commitment to the school.

Festivities continued as alumni toured the Pharmacy Building and reconnected with the spaces that shaped their student experience. Attendees also heard from Dean Gary Pollack, who shared updates on academic programs, the evolving landscape of pharmacy and plans for the future of the school's facilities.

The celebration concluded with a UB football game and special class gatherings for the Classes of 1975, 2010 and 2015, providing time to reconnect, reminisce and celebrate shared milestones.

Special thanks go to the class committee members who helped make the reunion possible by coordinating events and rallying classmates: Deanna (Stengel) Scibilia, PharmD '10; Caitlin (Hoar) Willis, PharmD '15; Carol Gloff, PharmD '75; Joe Twist, PharmD '75; and Mike Levitt, PharmD '75.

Planning is already underway for the next Alumni Reunion Celebration, and graduates are invited to save the date and join us for another weekend of connection and celebration. Details and updates will be available at pharmacy.buffalo.edu/alumni-reunion.

Class of 1975 alumni reconnecting at their 50th Reunion, held at Santora's Pizza Pub and Grill in Williamsville, NY.

THE CLASS OF **1975**

enjoyed such a memorable weekend that they continued the conversation well beyond it—staying connected, sharing life updates and reliving favorite memories.

If you're a member of the Class of 1975 and would like to read what your classmates have been up to since graduation, email Sarah Sterzinger, associate director of alumni engagement, at sjsterzi@buffalo.edu, for a digital copy of the collection.

SPPS Class of 2015 reconnecting at their 10th Reunion, held at Patrick's Rooftop in Buffalo.

Alumni reconnecting at the SPPS Alumni Reunion Welcome Dinner, held at The Terrace at Delaware Park in Buffalo.

SPPS Class of 2010 reconnecting at their 15th Reunion, held at Brazen Brewing in Lancaster, NY.

Alumni honored for excellence and service

BY KATIE BRIGHAM AND SARAH STERZINGER

The School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences is proud to recognize its 2025 alumni award recipients, honoring graduates whose careers reflect leadership, service and lasting impact across the pharmacy profession.

Ronald Evens, BS '69, PharmD

Willis G. Gregory Memorial Award

Ronald Evens, BS '69, PharmD, is the recipient of the 2025 Willis G. Gregory Memorial Award, the most prestigious honor conferred by the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, recognizing an alumnus who exemplifies service, integrity and excellence in the pharmacy profession.

After earning his PharmD and completing a clinical practice residency at the University of Kentucky, Evens built a distinguished career across academia, industry and biotechnology. He held faculty and leadership roles at the University of Texas and the University of Tennessee before transitioning to industry research at Bristol-Myers Co.

Beginning in 1989, Evens played a formative role in the biotechnology sector, including 13 years at Amgen, where he led professional services and organizational growth. For the past 25 years, he has served as president of M.A.P.S. for Biotech, advising companies on medical affairs operations and product launches.

He has maintained a long-standing commitment to academic scholarship, serving for 20 years as an adjunct research professor of biotechnology at Tufts University School of Medicine, Center for the Study of Drug Development. He also held adjunct clinical professor appointments at the colleges of pharmacy at the University of Florida and the University of the Pacific. His scholarly record includes 123 publications across biotechnology and multiple therapeutic areas.

His commitment to pharmacy education includes the establishment of the Evens Family Scholarship at UB SPPS and support for research programs through the American College of Clinical Pharmacy.

Alfonse Muto Jr., PharmD '08

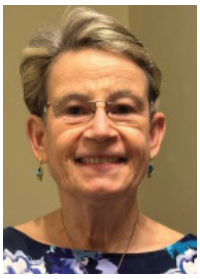
Orville C. Baxter Memorial Professional Practice Award

Alfonse Muto Jr., PharmD '08, is the recipient of the 2025 Orville C. Baxter Memorial Professional Practice Award, one of UB SPPS's highest alumni honors, recognizing an outstanding practicing pharmacist committed to professional excellence and patient care.

Following graduation, Muto joined Pine Pharmacy in Williamsville, founded by his father, Alfonse Muto Sr., a previous Baxter Award recipient. As a compounding pharmacist, he helped expand the business into Pine Pharmaceuticals, an FDA-registered 503B outsourcing facility now recognized as one of the industry's largest and most trusted providers of customized and ready-to-use medications. A 2021 expansion added a 50,000-square-foot facility and significantly increased manufacturing capacity and workforce, including many UB SPPS alumni.

Muto has served on the board of directors for the Pharmacists' Association of Western New York and chaired the IV, Nuclear and Compounding Academy of the Pharmacists Society of the State of New York. His leadership has earned national recognition, including the 2012 National Alliance of State Pharmacy Associations Excellence in Innovation Award.

Muto will be recognized during the UB SPPS Graduation Awards Ceremony in May 2026.



Karen Daly, BS '80

University at Buffalo Alumni Association Distinguished Alumni Award

Karen Daly, BS '80, was named a 2025 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient by the University at Buffalo Alumni Association, one of the university's highest alumni honors.

After beginning her career as a registered pharmacist, Daly earned her MD through a Navy Health Professions Scholarship and served for 30 years in the U.S. Navy Medical Corps, including deployments aboard the hospital ship Comfort following the Sept. 11 attacks. She retired as a Navy captain in 2014 and later continued her service as a civilian psychiatrist before retiring from clinical practice in 2025.

UB SPPS congratulates Daly on this university-wide recognition and celebrates her extraordinary record of service and leadership.

L-R: Henry and Mary Hu; Lawrence and Lina Kwok; Florence Ho and Wing Fung; Dan Wong; and Sue and Francis Marr.

The group celebrating their 50th reunion together in Greenville, South Carolina in December 2025.

Such good friends as these

BY JUDSON MEAD

As a young woman from Hong Kong studying at the University of Wisconsin–Platteville, Sue Ho (BS '75) was considering a path leading to medical technology. Where that path might have taken her, she'll never know.

Sue's good friend on campus, Henry Hu (BS '75), had been admitted to the UB School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and his example persuaded her to look at pharmacy as a career. She applied to the pharmacy school herself.

Fifty-three years later, Sue and her husband, Francis Marr (BS '74), were in Easley, South Carolina, at the home of her good friend and classmate Florence Ho (BS '75) happily reminiscing with the same Henry Hu and his wife, Mary (BS '74), Lawrence (BS '75) and Lina (BS '75) Kwok and Dan Wong (BS '75), a lively group at an impromptu, roughly 50th UB Pharmacy reunion of lifelong friends.

Like Sue, Francis Marr was headed in a particular direction, in his case a career in electrical engineering, but eventually, in middle life, found himself embarking on an entirely new career in equity real estate investment and property management.

Sue and Francis met at UB and married in 1975 in Rochester, New York, where he was studying for his master's at the University of Rochester and she was an interning at St. Mary's Hospital. He went to work for a Canadian communication technology company and the young couple moved to Ottawa, Canada.

Sue took Canadian qualifying exams, interned again, and went to work in retail pharmacy, which she remembers as not much different from U.S. retail pharmacy other than the greater availability of generic pharmaceuticals at the time in Canada.

Another memory of Canada, especially Ottawa, was the cold.

"We were young and the cold didn't bother us, I guess," she says, "but the mother of a friend who was visiting said to me at some point, 'You're living in a freezer, you know.'" That was Ottawa.

After six years in the freezer, Marr was transferred to Dallas, Texas, where they still live. Sue stepped away from full-time pharmacy to raise a daughter (now a pediatric dentist) and a son (now a combustion researcher with a doctorate in aerospace engineering).

Then, in 2001, their circumstances changed. Francis's job evaporated and Sue went back to full-time retail pharmacy while he changed careers. She worked for retail pharmacies from then until she retired in 2019—just before the COVID pandemic began.

In the meanwhile, the property business was burgeoning. At the height of their holdings, the Marrs owned 55 rental properties, with Francis the hands-on manager of everything. As they approached retirement, they began selling properties when the market was favorable, until they sold their last two this year.

Now the Marrs are making an investment of different kind, in the futures of UB pharmacy students, by endowing a scholarship to help PharmD students who have financial need, an investment that will provide assistance in perpetuity.

Sue says that as she looks back, she's more appreciative of the difference a scholarship made in her young life. "I'm grateful for the scholarship help I had that allowed me to finish school."

She wants to give the same kind of hand to future generations as a tangible expression of thanks for what she once received. The Marrs are funding the endowment through their donor advised fund and qualified charitable distributions from an IRA.

"Sometimes people don't feel like it helps a lot if the amount of a scholarship is relatively modest, but it does," she says. Her own experience was that the scholarship funds she received to make ends meet when she was at UB made a huge difference in her life.

Sue has a brother and other family members living in Toronto, so she and Francis have stopped in Buffalo from time to time on their way there. She enjoyed visiting classmates who had stayed in Buffalo. Those friends have since moved away, and the Marrs have been traveling directly to Toronto. But Sue hopes to pay the school a visit someday soon.

But that would be a question of when she could fit Buffalo into a travel schedule that takes her and Francis all over the world on trips every few months—most recently to Southeast Asia at the end of 2025 and to Europe in early 2026. In 2023, one of those trips saw the same group of classmates who gathered in South Carolina this past fall, together on a cruise to the Panama Canal.

In addition to their longstanding friendship, this happy group has consistently remembered the school where they first met with generous individual annual contributions of support.

Good friends with each other and, like Sue and Francis Marr, good friends of UB Pharmacy.

Wing and Rosina Lun endow pharmacy scholarship

BY JUDSON MEAD

When Wing Lun, BS '77, PharmD, was studying at UB, he worked the overnight shift in a commercial bakery during summer and winter breaks to maintain his financial independence. He knows what it's like to be a pharmacy student with limited means.

That's why he and his wife, Rosina, BS '77, are endowing a scholarship to help support students like himself, striving to begin careers as pharmacists, like the one he found so satisfying.

Wing and Rosina, who met at UB, spent their careers working in the Long Island and New York City areas. Rosina was a medical technologist.

When he was a student, Wing, who became a hospital pharmacy director, found a mentor in Robert Rozek, a community pharmacist who remains a friend to this day. Like the positive role Rozek played in his development, Wing would like to hand along to future students the basic precepts he developed as a pharmacy intern, then as a pharmacist, and eventually as a hospital pharmacy director.

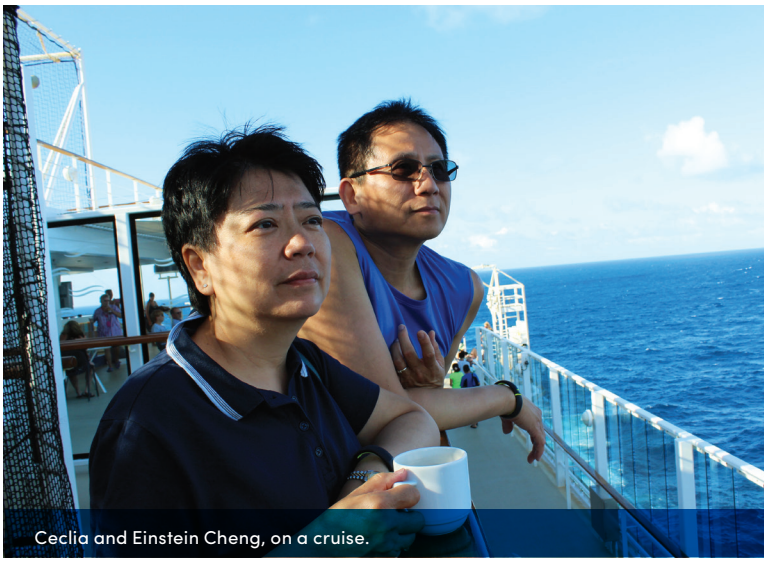
Students naturally aim for a high GPA as their goal in school, he says. This is a measure of academic performance, of course, and a source of pride for student and family. When that hard work pays off, the graduate earns the honor of being addressed as "Dr." and a good income.

"But there are things that are as important as getting a high grade-point average and earning a title and monetary gains," Wing says.

Such things include, but are not limited to:

1. being empathetic when interacting with others, especially patients;
2. continuing to keep up your knowledge and skills;
3. listening to the patient who seeks help from you;
4. learning from and working with other health care professionals and the patient as a team;
5. becoming a member of pharmacy societies at national, state and local levels to keep up with the latest development in pharmacy practice and to enhance your networking with other pharmacy leaders and practitioners;
6. being proactive and leading when the chance to do so is presented;
7. embracing automation technology and information systems;
8. being honest and not feeling bad if you don't have the answer to every question, and not hesitating to ask for help when needed;
9. being humble and opening your heart and mind to learn and create new ideas, and;
10. evaluating the impact of drug therapy on the physical health and mental health of patients when serving them in person or reviewing their health records.

"These virtues are as important as any material gains," Wing says. "They will support the sustainability and enhancement of our professionalism for many years to come."



Cecilia and Einstein Cheng, on a cruise.

Cecilia Cheng's good fortune

BY JUDSON MEAD

"I feel like I've been so advantaged," says Cecilia Cheng, BS '83. "Nobody gets to be as fortunate as I've been."

Her great good fortune: a good education, a wonderful marriage, a good life in Fresh Meadows, Queens, New York, and a successful artist daughter. Her big advantage: that she was 12 when she immigrated to the U.S. with her parents.

"I was very lucky. I was just on that cusp when it's still possible to master a new language with a child's ease." Her facility with English helped in the otherwise strange land of Port Washington, Long Island, where she guesses her family was one of four Chinese households in a community of some 10,000.

So today, when she reflects on the course of her life, Cheng says she doesn't consider the gift of an endowed scholarship to the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences to be an act of generosity at all, but rather a matter of forwarding to future generations the good fortune she's enjoyed.

It's Cheng's wish that the fruits of her gift appear in a student's financial aid package the way she remembers sums appearing in hers without expectation, as if by magic. "For me, dollars would just show up," she remembers with a laugh at the memory of how unquestioning she was. It was likely some New York State Regent's Scholarship funds.

Those extra dollars helped her pay for her education (at 1980s cost) without help from her parents. "I felt independent. I could manage on my own."

She needed that independence to get to UB. In her family's culture, Cheng says, children said yes to everything the parents told them to do. Or almost everything. When she was finishing high school, her parents told Cheng that she should study pharmacy (her parents had owned two drugstores in Hong Kong) at St. John's University in nearby Queens.

Cheng agreed to pharmacy, but not to St. John's. "I stood firm. It was too close," she says. "Going to college and living at home would

have been too much like high school." UB's School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences was her choice.

She looked up a UB directory and found some 50 students named Lee (her family name). UB wouldn't be another world where there were so few others like her. As it happened, her closest friend in the pharmacy program was Christine Lee, BS '83. She wasn't entirely out of her family's reach: they sent Cheng's younger brother to UB so she could keep an eye on him.

She returned to Long Island because her family needed her close. She worked as a pharmacist in long-term care, married Einstein Wong Cheng in 1986, left full-time pharmacy in 2000 to raise their daughter, Annie. She started volunteering at Annie's school and eventually made that a second ad hoc career, specializing in tutoring English-language learners.

Einstein Cheng, who had spent his career as a physician assistant at the New York-Presbyterian Queens Hospital, died in 2023, succumbing to pancreatic cancer. They had discussed making gifts to institutions that had been important in their lives: UB, their daughter's college among them. Their gift to SPPS funds the Cheng Family Scholarship. After Einstein's death, Cheng started a fund to buy "chemo" shirts for patients at his hospital. Last year, the fund was able to outfit all the hospital's chemotherapy patients with the garment that makes it easier to receive the treatment.

Cheng says she hasn't recovered from losing her husband. But even with that, she sees herself as lucky in life. And she wants some of that luck to descend on unsuspecting UB pharmacy students in the future, like random incidents of good fortune.

Einstein Cheng and his daughter, Annie, in the early 2000s.

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You can make a difference for UB's School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and do something good for your family!

Including UB in your will is a meaningful way to have an impact! There are also other ways to support the school.

Consider these options:

- Donate appreciated stock to avoid capital gains taxes
- Make a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) from your IRA to reduce your tax obligation
- Establish a charitable gift annuity and receive guaranteed income for life

Learn how your gift can make an impact today.
Contact us: dev-pg@buffalo.edu or 877-825-3422.

University at Buffalo
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Office of Communications
288 Pharmacy Building
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