



News Release
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Two UAMS Cancer Researchers Awarded American Cancer Society Grants Totaling \$1.58 Million

LITTLE ROCK — Two cancer researchers at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) have been awarded Research Scholar Grants from the American Cancer Society. [Aime Franco, Ph.D.](#), and [Ling Gao, M.D., Ph.D.](#), each received a four-year grant of \$791,000 to support their ongoing cancer research.

The grants are among 109 national research and training grants totaling more than \$45 million that will fund investigators at 75 institutions across the United States; 102 are new grants while seven are renewals of previous grants. The grants go into effect July 1.

“We at the American Cancer Society are proud to partner with the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences to award over \$1.5 million to Drs. Aime Franco and Ling Gao. Based on our extremely rigorous peer review system, we think these two young scientists represent some of the finest cancer researchers in the country,” said Charles Saxe, Ph.D., scientific director American Cancer Society’s Program in Cancer Cell Biology and Metastasis, Extramural Research Department.

Franco’s project titled “Tumor-Stromal Crosstalk in Papillary Thyroid Cancer” seeks to determine how non-thyroid cells found in and around thyroid tumors promote cancer progression and metastasis, which is the spread of cancer to other parts of the body.

“Our research has found that while thyroid tumors start out as primarily thyroid cells, they transition to tumors composed primarily of non-thyroid cells. It is critical to understand what these cells are doing, how they are driving progression of the tumor, and how we can target these cell types more effectively with our therapies,” said Franco, assistant professor in the UAMS College of Medicine Department of Physiology and Biophysics.

According to the National Cancer Institute, thyroid cancer rates have risen significantly during the past several years, due in part to improvements in early detection. While it is now the eighth most common cancer in the United States, thyroid cancer is predicted to rise to the fourth most common cancer by 2030, surpassing colon cancer.

Gao's project titled "Targeting the p110delta Isoform of PI3 Kinase in Merkel cell Carcinoma" is focused on the development of a potential new therapy for metastatic Merkel cell carcinoma, a rare skin cancer whose rates have quadrupled during the past 20 years. The disease has a five-year survival rate of about 60 percent in those where the cancer has not spread to other parts of the body. Once Merkel cell carcinoma spreads, the five-year survival rate drops significantly to only 18 percent, which is a lower survival rate than melanoma

Gao's project will investigate the potential of using drugs such as idelalisib that inhibit an intercellular signaling pathway called P13K to suppress the abnormal activity of the pathway and kill the tumors.

"There are no targeted therapies for metastatic Merkel cell carcinoma. Successful completion of this study will pave the way for potential clinical trials using P13K inhibitors to treat advanced Merkel cell carcinoma patients," said Gao, associate professor in the UAMS College of Medicine Department of Dermatology.

In addition to her research interests, Gao also formed and leads the clinical program at the UAMS Winthrop P. Rockefeller [Cancer Institute](#), providing personalized treatment plans for patients with Merkel cell carcinoma.

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a northwest Arkansas regional campus; a statewide network of regional centers; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, the Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, the Myeloma Institute, the Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, the Psychiatric Research Institute, the Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging and the Translational Research Institute. It is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 2,870 students, 799 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including about 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS and its regional campuses throughout the state, Arkansas Children's Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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