

CITY | STATE

# Diversity is a priority in new cancer fight

UH, MD Anderson seek young scholars to battle disease

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Sahar Eshtehardi, a 26-year-old doctoral candidate in the psychology program at the University of Houston, wants to use virtual reality to reduce anxiety and create behavioral changes in child leukemia patients.

Paulina Linares Abrego, a 20-year-old rising junior at the university, wants to work on smoking cessation in the Houston Latino community.

In particular, Linares Abrego wants to help young students get unbiased information on electronic cigarettes — a topic she says is “becoming very relevant to the youth.”

“Not everyone has the knowledge to choose wisely,” she said in a phone interview, extolling the benefits of lifestyle education.

Eshtehardi’s and Linares Abrego’s projects may not seem related. But both are part of UHAND — a new, multidisciplinary collaboration between the University of Houston and MD Anderson Cancer Center that aims to reduce cancer rates among black and Hispanic residents of Houston while also training young minority scholars in the fields of science and medicine.

The UHAND Program to Reduce Cancer Disparities — a four-year, \$275,000-per-year grant from the National Cancer Institute — will focus on cancer prevention in Houston’s Third Ward and East End: hubs for the

city’s African-American and Hispanic communities, respectively.

The program’s directors hope it will go beyond cancer research, inspiring a new generation of young minority academics, researchers and physicians focused on cancer.

Their goal is to create “doctors who like their communities,” as Lorraine Reitzel, the program’s University of Houston liaison, put it.

## Program details

On Monday, organizers from both institutions publicly spelled out new details of the program at the Texas Medical Center along with some troubling statistics. Black men and women have the highest cancer death rates. The 5-year cancer survival rate for blacks is 63 percent, versus 70 percent for whites, according to figures from the American Cancer Society.

For Hispanics, cancer is the leading cause of death and was to blame for 22 percent of all Hispanic deaths in 2012.

The differences between white and non-white cancer rates “largely reflect disproportionate poverty,” according to the American Cancer Society. Nine percent of whites live below the poverty line, compared to 22 percent of blacks and 19 percent of Hispanics.

In general, a strong correlation exists between low socioeconomic status and cancer regardless of racial or ethnic identity. Whites and blacks with a high school education or less are three times more likely to contract any type of cancer compared to those with more educa-

## Cancer by the numbers

IN 2018:

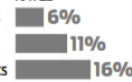
New cancer cases in the United States 1,735,350      121,860      New cancer cases in Texas

2005-2018

ESTIMATED 5-YEAR CANCER SURVIVAL RATE



UNINSURED RATES



Source: American Cancer Society

Houston Chronicle

tion. The organization attributes this to a variety of factors, including a higher chance for late-stage diagnoses, lower insurance rates and “targeted marketing... by tobacco companies and fast food chains.”

Up to half of all cancer deaths are preventable, UHAND organizers said, caused by poor diet, lack of exercise and smoking, among other factors. The American Cancer Society estimates that 42 percent of cancer diagnoses nationwide — 729,000 cases in 2018 — are “potentially avoidable.”

While UHAND initially obtained funding last September, the first group of students started orientation in June after an almost yearlong planning and application process.

The program aims to bring in a total of 18 students in two groups of 9. Five faculty members from MD Anderson are joining the program, as are three from UH. At least 20 more faculty from both institutions will serve as “mentors” to help students with their projects.

Even the name “UHAND” is a collaboration: The UH in the name comes from the University of Houston and the “AND”

stands for “Anderson” — as in MD Anderson Cancer Center.

The University of Houston will send participating students to churches and other institutions throughout the Third Ward and East End to conduct research and teach residents about nutrition, exercise and smoking cessation.

MD Anderson hopes the university — where almost 75 percent of undergraduates are non-white — will also serve as a pipeline of diverse talent, encouraging “underrepresented” students to go into cancer-related professions.

## College of Medicine

For the University of Houston, a partnership with MD Anderson — one of the country’s premier cancer hospitals and research institutions — is a boon.

The university intends to open a new College of Medicine, with the goal of getting “preliminary accreditation” by late 2019, according to the university’s website.

At Monday’s event, Renu Khator, president and chancellor of the UH system, said she was thrilled about the new relationship.

“I’ve always held MD Anderson in such high esteem,” she said.

Besides, Khator said to laughter, now MD Anderson would finally have a college football team to root for.

U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Houston, spoke about the “issue of bias and discrimination in science and medicine.” She had high praise for cancer researchers, comparing the Texas Medical Center to “hallowed grounds.”

Citing figures from the National Academy of Sciences, Jackson Lee nonetheless offered some worrying facts. Twenty-five percent of white medical residents think black people have thicker skin, she said. Almost 5 percent believe black people have “less sensitive” nerve endings.

To Jackson Lee, these misconceptions were a sign that bias, even among well-intentioned doctors, could hurt health outcomes. To applause, she said she hoped UHAND would play a “small part — or signature part — in breaking that cycle.”

The young UHAND scholars said they understand the important roles they might play in creating more equitable health care. But they are equally — or perhaps even more — excited about the opportunities for mentorship.

“There are so many opportunities to learn,” said Eshtehardi, the doctoral student participating in the program. “Not just from psychologists, but also from epidemiologists, researchers and community leaders.”

“It gives me access to resources and tools I would not normally have,” Eshtehardi added.