

Local

UCSB researcher focusing on prevention of Alzheimer's

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A random thought at a serendipitous meeting may ultimately help prevent people from losing their ability to think, according to UCSB neuroscientist Kenneth Kosik.

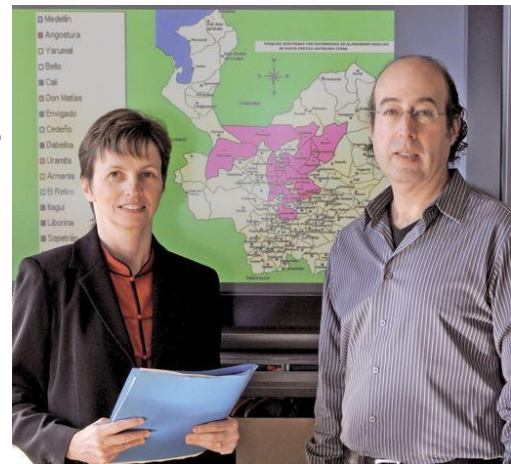
After completing a lecture at a University in Bogota, Colombia, many years ago, Dr. Kosik was approached by a neurologist named Francisco Lopera. The Colombian medical specialist mentioned as an afterthought that he knew of an extended family in the town of Medellin whose members all seemed to be developing Alzheimer's disease at an early age.

"I didn't pay much attention at first. As a neuroscientist, it was not uncommon for people to talk to me about friends and relatives who suffered from the disease, and this was before we fully understood that some cases of Alzheimer's disease had genetic links." Dr. Kosik told the News-Press.

"Dr. Lopera persisted in mentioning this strange family occurrence until its significance finally hit me." Dr. Kosik said. "This had to be the largest cluster of familial Alzheimer's disease in the world, passed down in each generation to family members in their mid-40s. That's when I got on the first plane to Medellin, about 500 miles away."

That was the beginning of Dr. Kosik's 20-year-long Colombian research odyssey that was recently featured in a Cable News Network documentary titled "Filling the Blank." The professor commuted between Medellin and his home in Boston while working with Dr. Lopera in a region called Antioquia.

As their studies progressed, the research field itself underwent a sea change. "It shifted emphasis



UCSB neuroscientist Kenneth Kosik and Marianne Heydt-Munce, are co-executive directors of a nonprofit Santa Barbara cognitive health clinic termed CFIT. They are shown in front of a map of the state of Antioquia, Colombia, where Dr. Kosik tracked the history of Alzheimer's disease in an extended family. His 20-year-long Colombian research study was the subject of a recent television documentary.

STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS

from the more daunting goal of repairing the brain of a person with Alzheimer's disease to preventing the disease before it strikes. In that regard, we were in the right place at the right time," Dr. Kosik said.

Those Colombian family members who carry the Alzheimer's gene will definitely get the disease, he said.

"This type of early onset can be very poignant. We often saw a parent caring for a middle-aged son or daughter who had the disease."

The doctor is raising funds from government and industry to build a clinic in the Medellin region to test for the disease and provide a better understanding of how the Alzheimer's gene is acquired.

"Clinical trials could help us find out whether or not certain drugs and other therapies are effective in delaying the disease onset in those family members who have the gene," Dr. Kosik said. "We would be able to find out if drugs really work."

Back in Santa Barbara, Dr. Kosik is working at UCSB's Neuroscience Research Institute to better understand the way Alzheimer's disease attacks the brain. Many promising results have come from his laboratory.

"More scientific research is required if we are going to eradicate the disease. It is a worldwide problem, affecting every ethnic group and every socioeconomic group. It places tremendous burdens on families and on society," the medical researcher said.

Dr. Kosik is the founder and co-director of the first full-service "cognitive shop" in the nation. It is a Santa Barbara-based, nonprofit medical organization open to all, called CFIT, an acronym for Cognitive Fitness and Innovative Therapies.

No memory improvement clinics existed in the nation until CFIT came along, Dr. Kosik said.

"You could go to a dentist to prevent tooth decay or to an eye doctor to prevent glaucoma, but there was no place to go to insure the health of your brain," he said.

Until a cure for Alzheimer's disease emerges, the establishment of community-based centers, such as CFIT, that focus on cognitive health could make a significant dent in the problem. CFIT draws corollaries between the disease and lifestyle changes, stressing common denominator relationships between brain health and heart health and between brain health and social relationships.

Eating right, exercising, being socially active and mentally engaged, especially via the computer, can go a long way to insuring a healthy brain throughout life, according to CFIT's website www.sbcfit.org. The organization can be contacted by phone at 805-899-7777.

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