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Alzheimer's researcher honored

By George Stewart

Cowan Heights resident, Dr. Carl Cotman, has worked more than 30 years at the University of California at Irvine, researching the causes and treatment of Alzheimer's disease.

On Saturday, Cotman, a professor of neurology and neurobiology and behavior, was one of three people honored by the Orange County chapter of the Alzheimer's Association for making an exceptional contribution through his research at UCI.

More specifically, he was honored for founding and directing UCI's Institute for Brain Aging and Dementia. Besides doing research, the institute provides a broad range of free educational programs, services and advocacy for Orange County, where more than 60,000 people suffer from this progressive, degenerative disease of the brain, the most common form of dementia, or are at high risk of developing the disease in the near future.

The bio-chemist was born in Ohio and raised in Cleveland. He earned his first degree in chemistry at Wooster College and his doctorate in chemistry from Indiana University.

“Bio-chemistry seemed like a nice biological aspect of chemistry,” Cotman said. “I was interested in how cells work and dysfunction. I was interested in

diseases.”

Cotman describes his laboratory as a “multi-disciplinary program,” studying molecular biology, cell cultures, animal models and finally applications that can be conducted in a clinical setting for humans.

“We pioneered basic science and applications to clinical treatments,” he said. “We were pioneers in the study of mechanisms for the accumulation of beta-amyloid, a substance that accumulates in the brain with age and one of the causes of the disease. We discovered that it's toxic and causes cell dysfunction, definitely a driving cause of Alzheimer's.”

Basically, he is looking at the causes of Alzheimer's, from its simplest to its most complex levels, as well as ways to treat it.

“We have a clinical program that includes studies diagnosing Alzheimer's disease and evaluating various treatment strategies,” Cotman said. “For example, our group was originally responsible for the investigation of anti-oxidants, like vitamin E, and the effects of it. We had the first demonstration of intervention to slow the progression of the disease.”

In 2001, Cotman was honored by the Society of Neurosciences as one of 100

highly-cited researchers in the nation. He has more than 655 publications in national journals, and is invited to speak at many conferences throughout the world. He just returned from speaking at an international conference on Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases in Sorrento, Italy, his second speaking engagement in Europe in a month.

Last year he received the UCI Medal, the school's highest honor, for his accomplishments in research and teaching, as well as his service to UCI.

"I enjoy my work," Cotman said. "It's stimulating, engaging and addresses a problem that affects the entire nation. It's an important goal."

His advice on how to avoid getting Alzheimer's disease is simple.

"I think families need to follow common sense and do what your mom told you to do," he said. "Eat fruits and vegetables, avoid fats and high cholesterol. Exercise actually stimulates the brain and increases its healing power."

Cotman warned that the disease can have a horrible affect on the families of the victim, completely changing the victim's personality, sometimes to the point where they do not even recognize their loved ones.

"Once you come down with it," he said, "you have to be sure to avoid depression. Stay stimulated. Families should protect themselves by not getting burned out. Senior centers are excellent for that."

"Have a good doctor prescribe the latest and current effective medications."

Certain medications will alleviate the symptoms and slow down the progression. It's best not to wait too long, once you notice the symptoms."

The Alzheimer's Association, during a gala to celebrate its 25th anniversary, named Cotman Community Partner of the Year.

"It's exciting," he said. "I'm honored. It's a great tribute to the university and the programs we put together there."

Cotman's institute does a lot of work with the Alzheimer's Association. It is a co-sponsor of the association's annual conference.

This year's conference, entitled "Emerging Concepts in the Treatment of Alzheimer's Disease," will be held July 28-29 at the Hyatt Regency in Irvine. Anyone from the public who wants to learn more about the disease is welcome to attend.