

# MIND Matters

TURNING UP THE RESEARCH • AMPLIFYING THE HOPE



**S. Ahmad Sajjadi, MD, PhD**

Associate Director  
for Clinical Research

**Crystal M. Glover, PhD**

Associate Director of  
Community Engagement and Education

**Kim Green, PhD**

Associate Director  
for Basic Science

## UCI MIND Names Three New Associate Directors

The mission of UCI MIND is to conduct multidisciplinary, collaborative translational research and to engage the local Orange County community in research and bring scientific discoveries back to the people we serve. This mission has grown. More than 70 faculty investigators who hold appointments in 28 different departments around the campus are UCI MIND members, with most focused on work at the bench or in the clinic. Simultaneously, the work of UCI MIND in the community, through traditional grassroots educational programs as well as digital platforms such as the UCI MIND Blog, the Spotlight on Care podcast, and social media has continued to expand since the COVID pandemic.

Given this and other growth in UCI MIND's mission, the need and opportunity for expanded leadership are clear. We are pleased to announce that three tenured UCI MIND faculty will be assuming leadership roles in the Institute. S. Ahmad Sajjadi, MD, PhD, will now serve as Associate Director for Clinical Research; Crystal M. Glover, PhD, will serve as Associate Director of Community Engagement and Education; and Kim Green, PhD, will serve as Associate Director for Basic Science. These three investigators, each renowned for their unique expertise, will now be asked to lead separate elements under UCI MIND's large and increasing portfolio of activities. Congratulations, Ahmad, Crystal, and Kim. ■

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Dear Friends of **UCI MIND**,

It has been an exciting summer for UCI MIND. Our researchers were once again prominent in presenting their exciting progress at the annual Alzheimer's Association International Conference (AAIC, p. 3-4). We have welcomed new faces to the UCI MIND team and made some key changes in structure. UCI MIND has named Sonia Batra (p. 8) Senior Director of Development to guide our efforts in philanthropy. Many have come to know our annual calendar of philanthropic events, including our *December to Remember Gala*. We will pause that event this year, as we direct our fundraising efforts toward the completion of Quilter Hall and growing the research enterprise that will thrive there.

This issue also introduces three new positions at UCI MIND in the form of Associate Directors (p. 1). S. Ahmad Sajjadi, MD, PhD, Crystal Glover, PhD, and Kim Green, PhD, all tenured professors at UCI, have agreed to play leadership roles in UCI MIND, expanding our capacity and bringing new vision and ideas to our leadership structure.

We hope you too have had an exciting and productive summer.



*Joshua D. Grill*

**Joshua D. Grill, PhD**  
Director, UCI MIND

## FACULTY MEMBERS

### Anatomy & Neurobiology

Aileen Anderson, PhD  
Tallie Baram, MD, PhD  
Christine Gall, PhD, Chair  
Alan Goldin, MD, PhD  
Kei Igarashi, PhD  
Gary Lynch, PhD  
Steven Schreiber, MD  
John Weiss, MD, PhD  
Xiangmin Xu, PhD

### Biological Chemistry

Wei Li, PhD

### Biomedical Engineering

Gregory Brewer, PhD

### Chemistry

James Nowick, PhD  
Xiaoyu Shi, PhD

### Clinical Pharmacy Practice

Atena Zahedi, PhD

### Developmental & Cell Biology

Grant MacGregor, DPhil  
Edwin Monuki, MD, PhD  
Ali Mortazavi, PhD  
Diane O'Dowd, PhD  
Xiaoyu Shi, PhD

### Electrical Engineering & Computer Science

Fei Xia, PhD

### Environmental & Occupational Health

Masashi Kitazawa, PhD  
Karen Lincoln, PhD, MSW, MA, FGSA

### Epidemiology

Maria Corrada, ScD  
Daniel Gillen, PhD  
Luohua Jiang, MD, PhD  
Sunmin Lee, ScD  
Min Zhang, MD, PhD

### Health, Society, & Behavior

Leigh Turner, PhD

### Medicine

Masashi Kitazawa, PhD  
Steven Tam, MD

### Microbiology & Molecular Genetics

Emiliana Borrelli, PhD  
Alan Goldin, MD, PhD

### Molecular Biology & Biochemistry

Charles Glabe, PhD  
Andrea Tenner, PhD

### Music

Irene Messoloras, DMA

### Neurobiology & Behavior

Mathew Blurton-Jones, PhD  
Jorge Busciglio, PhD  
Christine Gall, PhD  
Kim Green, PhD  
Joshua Grill, PhD  
Frank LaFerla, PhD, Dean  
Michael Leon, PhD  
Craig Stark, PhD  
Vivek Swarup, PhD  
Leslie Thompson, PhD  
Marcelo Wood, PhD, Chair  
Huixin Xu, PhD  
Michael Yassa, PhD

### Neurological Surgery

Jefferson Chen, MD

### Neurology

Tallie Baram, MD, PhD  
Maria Corrada, ScD  
David Cribbs, PhD  
Ali Ezzati, MD  
Mark Fisher, MD  
Lisa Flanagan, PhD  
Crystal M. Glover, PhD  
Claire Henchcliffe, MD, DPhil, Chair  
Brian Hitt, MD, PhD  
Hayley Kristinsson, PsyD, ABPP-CN  
Albert La Spada, MD, PhD  
Ira Lott, MD  
Mark Mapstone, PhD  
Tahseen Mozaffar, MD  
S. Ahmad Sajjadi, MD, PhD  
Steven Schreiber, MD  
Gaby Thai, MD  
John Weiss, MD, PhD  
Michael Yassa, PhD

### Nursing

Michael Bueno, PhD, MSN, RN, CNL  
Sarah Campbell, DNP, MS, BS, AS  
Jung-Ah Lee, PhD, RN, FGSA, FAAN  
Adey M. Nyamathi, ANP, PhD, FAAN  
Nancy Pike, PhD, FNP-BC, CPNP-AC/PC, FAHA, FAAN, Associate Dean, Research

### Otolaryngology

Mehdi Abouzari, MD, PhD

### Pathology & Laboratory Medicine

Elizabeth Head, PhD, Vice Chair  
Albert La Spada, MD, PhD  
Edwin Monuki, MD, PhD, Chair  
Mari Perez-Rosendahl, MD  
William Yong, MD

### Pediatrics

Tallie Baram, MD, PhD  
Virginia Kimonis, MD  
Ira Lott, MD

### Pharmaceutical Sciences

Emiliana Borrelli, PhD

### Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation

Aileen Anderson, PhD  
Brian Cummings, PhD

### Physiology & Biophysics

Kevin Beier, PhD  
Alan Goldin, MD, PhD

### Psychiatry & Human Behavior

Lydia Ann, MD  
Cameron Carter, MD, Chair  
Joshua Grill, PhD  
Christy Hom, PhD  
Gary Lynch, PhD  
Bryce Mander, PhD  
Joan Steffan, PhD  
David Sultzer, MD  
Leslie Thompson, PhD  
Michael Yassa, PhD  
Afsara Zaheed, PhD

### Radiation Oncology

Charles Limoli, PhD

### Statistics

Daniel Gillen, PhD, Chair  
Bin Nan, PhD



# HERE, THERE & EVERYWHERE:

## UCI MIND Travels to London for AAIC 2026

By Valerie Tung and Melany Medina

**J**uly 12th through July 15th, researchers and advocates from around the world filled the halls of Excel London, energized to hear the latest advances in the field of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) research at this year's Alzheimer's Association International Conference (AAIC). The conference convened more than 10,000 in-person attendees and 3,000 online participants to share discoveries, create new collaborations, and discuss the challenges that remain in the field of ADRD research.

UCI MIND once again had a notable presence at this year's conference, with more than 85 poster presentations and 5 invited talks from trainees and staff. **More than 50 UCI MIND faculty, trainees, and staff made the journey to London**, presenting topics ranging from brain immune cell advances to considerations for clinical trial design.

**Research Professor Hayk Davtyan, PhD**, from Dr. Mathew Blurton-Jones' Lab, presented work exploring a new approach involving replacing sick brain immune cells, called microglia, with healthy ones as a potential treatment for neurological disorders. The research team compared two types of replacement cells, one grown in the lab from stem cells and one taken from human blood. While both replacement cells took hold in mouse brains, the human blood-derived cells continued to show inflammation and behavioral changes consistent with elevated anxiety months later. The findings have important implications in the development of future microglial replacement therapies.

**Lisi Flores Aguilar, PhD**, a postdoctoral scholar in Dr. Elizabeth Head's Lab, shared findings from her work on resilience and resistance to Alzheimer's disease in individuals with Down syndrome (DS). At autopsy, almost all people with DS, who are at high genetic risk for AD, develop the hallmark neuropathological beta-amyloid plaques and tau tangles by age 40. However, some individuals with DS never develop dementia. Examining brain tissue from over 60 adults with DS, the research team identified a small group who remained cognitively intact well into their 60s and 70s. These individuals had larger, better-preserved brains, less damage to the hippocampus, a region critical for memory, and showed resistance to the toxic protein buildup that typically drives cognitive decline. Their findings may point toward protective mechanisms that may be beneficial as targets for therapy development.

**Zara Melikyan, PhD**, a Project Scientist and Neuropsychologist working with Dr. Michael Yassa and collaborators including Drs. Maria Corrada and Bryce Mander, presented work on whether it was possible to monitor sleep at home in people aged 90 or older. The team used a lightweight sleep monitoring device, which measures the electrical activity in the brain, over the course of three nights. They concluded that it was possible to monitor sleep at home for those considered the "oldest old". This work opens the door to larger sleep studies in this fast-growing segment of the population.

**Casey Vanderlip, MD-PhD trainee**, from Dr. Craig Stark's Lab, moderated a session and presented in another at the conference. His research showed that a short, self-administered digital cognitive test can identify a specific group of amyloid-positive, cognitively normal individuals who are at high risk for cognitive decline. When this digital tool was combined with a blood-based Alzheimer's biomarker, the ability to predict decline

improved further. These findings could help researchers enroll the right participants in clinical trials and identify people who may benefit from early intervention.

Several UCI MIND researchers also demonstrated their leadership by moderating sessions throughout the conference. **Dana Parker, MS**, a graduate student in Dr. Michael Yassa's Lab, moderated a lightning round session focused on brain inflammation and lifestyle factors. **Dr. S. Ahmad Sajjadi** moderated a session on advances in neuropathological characterization and biomarkers of limbic-predominant age-related TDP-43 encephalopathy (LATE), a condition that closely mimics Alzheimer's disease, particularly in adults over

age 80. The session highlighted novel assessment approaches and a new neuroimaging method in hopes of distinguishing LATE from other dementias.

Before AAIC officially began, **Dr. Crystal M. Glover**, co-led a preconference titled "Don't Lose People in Translation: How to Design Multiculturally Inclusive Clinical Practice and Research." The workshop brought together researchers and clinicians to explore practical strategies for making dementia research more accessible and welcoming to people from a variety of backgrounds.

**AAIC 2026 was a reminder of the progress being made in ADRD research at UCI MIND and around the world.**

## RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT FROM AAIC

### LatAm-FINGERS | By Melany Medina

Findings from the Alzheimer's Association-funded Latin American Initiative for Lifestyle Intervention to Prevent Cognitive Decline (LatAm-FINGERS) were presented at AAIC on July 13th. The study demonstrated that a structured brain health program could be successfully carried out across 11 countries with varying diets, healthcare systems, and resources.

The two-year study enrolled 1,065 participants at risk for cognitive decline across 12 sites in Latin America. Participants were randomly assigned to either a structured program that included supervised exercise, nutrition counseling, cognitive training, and regular group meetings for social support or a more flexible, self-guided program.

Both groups showed improvements in memory and thinking skills over the two years, with participants in the structured program showing greater cognitive improvements than those in the more flexible program.

The program was adapted to local cultures, incorporating activities like salsa, outdoor group exercise, and regional foods like avocado and chia. These findings reinforce other similar results that lifestyle choices may affect cognition and extend the evidence to populations in the Global South. Limitations include that the study was designed to test whether the program could be successfully implemented rather than to definitively prove its effectiveness on cognition.

### LiBBY | By Valerie Tung

The LiBBY Trial (Life's end Benefits of cannaBidiol and tetraHydrocannabinol), an Alzheimer's Clinical Trials Consortium sponsored study, reported encouraging topline results for treating agitation in hospice-eligible individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD). This population is frequently excluded from clinical trials, despite experiencing among the highest rates of behavioral symptoms.

Agitation affects many individuals with advanced dementia and is associated with increased caregiver burden, reduced quality of life, and greater healthcare utilization. Current pharmacologic treatments provide only modest benefit and may carry significant safety concerns. The LiBBY trial was designed to evaluate a purified investigational combination of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD) in hospice-eligible patients with clinically significant agitation.

The study successfully met its primary endpoint, demonstrating a statistically significant reduction in agitation for the THC/CBD arm after two weeks

compared with placebo. Improvements were observed and maintained through 12 weeks, suggesting sustained benefit over the course of treatment.

Investigators emphasized that the study medication (4mg THC and 200mg CBD, twice daily) is a proprietary purified formulation developed specifically for this trial and that the findings should not be generalized to commercially available cannabis or marijuana products.

Beyond its specific findings, the LiBBY trial represents an important milestone for dementia research by demonstrating that rigorous randomized clinical trials can be successfully conducted in hospice-eligible individuals: a population that has historically been underrepresented in research despite substantial unmet medical needs. If confirmed in future studies, this novel THC/CBD formulation could offer a new evidence-based option for managing agitation while improving comfort and quality of life for individuals with advanced dementia receiving end-of-life care. ■



# New FDA-Approved Treatment Expands Options for Agitation in Alzheimer's Disease

By Valerie Tung

A newly approved therapy offers another option for managing one of the most challenging symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

**AGITATION**—including restlessness, pacing, verbal outbursts, and aggression—is one of the most challenging symptoms of Alzheimer's disease for both patients and caregivers. While non-pharmacologic approaches remain the first-line of therapy, medication may be appropriate when symptoms become severe or place individuals at risk.

In April 2026, the FDA approved a combination of dextromethorphan and bupropion called Auvelity for the treatment of agitation associated with Alzheimer's disease, making it the second FDA-approved medication for this indication. Unlike brexpiprazole (Rexulti), the first FDA-approved treatment for Alzheimer's-related agitation, Auvelity is not an antipsychotic. Instead, it combines dextromethorphan, which acts on several brain signaling pathways, with bupropion, which helps increase and prolong dextromethorphan's effects.

The approval was based on two randomized clinical trials. In one study, participants receiving Auvelity experienced greater reductions in agitation compared with placebo. In a second study, only 8% of participants who continued taking Auvelity experienced a return of agitation

symptoms over six months, compared with 29% of those randomly assigned to switch to placebo.

Auvelity expands treatment options by offering a different mechanism of action than antipsychotic medications. Because it is not an antipsychotic, it does not carry the movement-related side effects or FDA black box warning for increased mortality associated with antipsychotic use in older adults with dementia-related psychosis, though it does have a black box warning related to suicidal ideation. Longer-term experience will continue to clarify its safety profile.

Brexpiprazole remains an important treatment option and has demonstrated significant reductions in agitation in multiple clinical trials. There have been no studies comparing brexpiprazole and Auvelity.

The approval of Auvelity represents another meaningful step forward in dementia care. While medications are only one part of managing agitation, having a second FDA-approved treatment provides clinicians and families with greater flexibility to tailor care to each individual's needs. ■

# Expanding Pathways to Discovery



*A Beall Scholar explores neuroscience through an immersive virtual reality experience.*



*Graduate student Viky Espericueta and the Beall Scholars get an inside look at neuroscience research.*

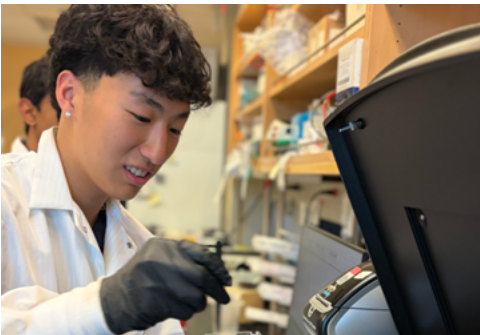
UCI MIND is committed to training the next generation of clinicians and scientists invested in ADRD research. This summer UCI MIND faculty and staff led two high school programs, an undergraduate data science program, a graduate medical school research mentorship, and hosted several K-12 outreach events.

An innovative program matches second-year medical students with UCI faculty to conduct neuroscience research. The program is supported by Lorna Carlin, MD, the non-profit organization Hilarity for Charity founded by Seth Rogen and Lauren Miller Rogen, and a T35 grant from the National Institute on Aging. This summer, 14 UCI medical students participated.

The Department of Statistics' Irvine Summer Institute in Biostatistics and Undergraduate Data Science immersed 15 undergraduates from around the country in a six-week intensive residential biostatistics program designed to increase the number of people who pursue careers in data science. The program is co-led by UCI MIND faculty member Dr. Daniel Gillen and includes lectures by several UCI MIND faculty and trainees.

For the sixth year in a row, the trainee-led group Research and Education in Memory Impairments and Neurological Disorders (REMIND) welcomed 15 rising 12th graders from around Orange County to participate in the Beall Scholar Program, a 1-week neuroscience program followed by a 1-year mentorship supported by Joan and Don Beall.

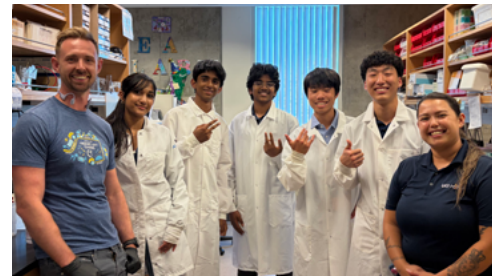
**Beall Scholars gain a deeper understanding of the brain during a hands-on UCI MIND session.**



*A GATI AXON student gains hands-on laboratory experience.*



*Postdoctoral scholar, Claire Butler, PhD, teaches the GATI AXON students*



*Postdoctoral scholar Jacob Dohl, PhD, and graduate student Justine Silva, guide the GATI AXON students in the Head Lab.*

Scholars were exposed to faculty lectures, lab tours, demonstrations and campus resources. In addition, all food and materials were provided, transportation was offered, and scholars received a modest stipend.

This year, UCI MIND partnered with the Division of Education at UCI and the Gifted and Talented Institute to pilot GATI AXON, an offshoot of the popular GATI BEAM, a 2-week residential research and entrepreneurial experience. Thirty-two students from across the globe participated in 13 morning lectures, afternoon lab sessions with 4 UCI MIND investigators including Drs. Craig Stark, Elizabeth Head, Vivek Swarup, and Mathew Blurton-Jones, and then engaged in evening innovation workshops. On the final day, the students presented

their projects aimed at addressing the ADRD crisis.

To culminate a health equity research project on Alzheimer's disease and care services, high school students from Gretchen Whitney High School visited UCI MIND for a tour of the Tissue Repository, a lab that houses 1,600 brains from donors who participated in research over a 40-year span.

Finally, members of a Brownie troop visited the UCI MIND Tissue Repository to get an up-close look at a human brain and learn about our body's most important organ. UCI MIND Tissue Repository staff Brianna Gawronski and Lourdes Gonzalez led the tour with assistance from REMIND co-chairs. ■



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## WELCOME NEW FACULTY AND STAFF



**Afsara Zaheed, PhD**, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior and a clinical psychologist with expertise in geriatric neuropsychology. She obtained her doctorate at the University of Michigan and completed her predoctoral internship at UCLA before pursuing translational research training in sleep and circadian science as a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Pittsburgh. Broadly, Dr. Zaheed's research program focuses on investigating how sleep and other modifiable biopsychosocial factors throughout the life-course influence cognitive aging trajectories and the development and acceleration of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD).

Grounded in theories emphasizing the role of interpersonal, structural, and cultural contexts in shaping health, her research integrates cross-disciplinary methods and fosters collaborative partnerships across psychology, public health, neurology, and related fields. Dr. Zaheed's work has been supported by the National Institute on Aging, and her research has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals, including *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, *SLEEP*, and the *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*. As a member of UCI MIND and the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, Dr. Zaheed looks forward to extending her research on sleep and dementia while fostering new opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement.

Ultimately, she hopes that this work will inform the development of targeted individual- and population-level interventions aimed at promoting healthy cognitive aging and preventing inequities in ADRD.



**Sonia Batra** is Senior Director of Development at UCI MIND, where she works to advance the organization's mission through philanthropy and strategic engagement with donors, community partners, and faculty.

Sonia has served in various roles across UC Irvine since 2015, including positions within the School of Physical Sciences, the School of Pharmacy & Pharmaceutical Sciences, and the Paul Merage School of Business. Through these experiences, she has developed a deep understanding of the university and a passion for building meaningful relationships that connect philanthropy with institutional priorities.

Her commitment to UCI MIND's mission is also deeply personal. Her father experienced vascular dementia, giving her a firsthand understanding of the profound impact dementia can have on individuals and families. She is honored to bring both her professional experience and personal connection to this work, helping advance research, education, and community impact for those affected by Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

Sonia holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Southern California and an MBA from the UC Irvine Paul Merage School of Business.