MU receives $4.5M research grant

COLUMBIA, Mo. — The University of Missouri-Columbia is using a $4.5 million federal grant to conduct research aimed at helping patients and doctors make better health care decisions.

KMIZ-TV reports that that money will help create the MU Center for Patient-Centered Outcomes Research.

University of Missouri interim chancellor Steve Owens says the grant will "expand the capacity of the university to focus on improving outcomes for patients everywhere."

Researchers will be able to compare whether open surgery or less invasive procedures through arteries are more effective at saving limbs and avoiding repeat hospitalizations. Other research topics include making better decisions about prescribing narcotics for chronic pain and improving the discharge process for patients returning home from skilled nursing facilities.
MU receives $4.5 million grant for health care research

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BY CASEY BISCHEL

COLUMBIA — Patient-centered research at MU received a funding boost on Thursday with a $4.5 million federal grant.

The grant will fund three primary projects over five years and involve the School of Medicine, the Sinclair School of Nursing, the School of Health Professions and the School of Journalism.

The grant, from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality of the Department of Health and Human Services, is "the kind of Christmas present we would love to have every year," Leslie Hall, interim dean of the School of Medicine, said. MU is one of seven institutions to receive funding.

The grant's principal investigator, David Mehr, outlined the three projects, which are meant to empower patients by giving them a more active role in making personal health-care decisions:

- The first compares whether open surgery or less invasive procedures through arteries allow patients to avoid repeat hospitalizations.

- The second seeks to improve communication between health-care professionals and patients who have been discharged from nursing facilities.

- The third reviews primary care practices to help doctors make better decisions about prescribing narcotics for chronic pain, an issue that Mehr said has gained particular attention in recent years.
Results from the projects should appear in three to five years, Mehr, a professor in the School of Medicine, said.

Knitting the projects together is a mobile app, called Treepple, that will allow patients to receive tailored health news, build personal health records and share their health with their "circle of care," including doctors, family members and their support network, said Glen Cameron, professor of journalism and co-director of the Health Communication Research Center at MU.

Cameron conducted field tests with Treepple, one with baby boomers ages 48-to-65 years old and another with diabetics. Now he is trying out the program with the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas. Able to connect with a network of others, one man was thankful that Treepple showed him he had support in managing his diabetes, Cameron said.

Treepple will focus on younger baby boomers who, as they retire, will have more time to spend on social media, Cameron said. The grant "will make a difference to me in the not-so-distant future," he said.

The health news Treepple users receive will not carry commercials but instead will alert users to appearances of their medical issues in the news.

The grant "is a high point in my career," Mehr said.
Colleges Would Have 'Skin in the Game' Under Democrats' Student-Debt Plan

By Andy Thomason

Washington

No MU Mention

Taking aim at mounting levels of student-loan debt, three prominent Democratic senators introduced legislation on Thursday that would penalize colleges and universities whose student-loan default rates exceeded certain thresholds.

By requiring that institutions have "skin in the game"—by assuming some of the risk of default in their students' federal loans—the proposed legislation would create incentives for colleges to help their students find the least-expensive sources of financial aid, Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island said during a press call. Sen. Richard J. Durbin of Illinois and Sen. Elizabeth A. Warren of Massachusetts, who also participated in the call, co-sponsored the bill.

The proposed legislation, dubbed the Protect Student Borrowers Act of 2013, would affect only institutions that have federal student-aid enrollment rates of 25 percent or higher, and the penalties would be imposed on a sliding scale.

Colleges and universities with student-loan default rates of more than 30 percent would pay a fine to the Department of Education equal to 20 percent of the total value of loans issued to their students in default. As default rates decline, so would the proposed fines; the least-severe infraction—default rates from 15 percent to 20 percent—would require a 5-percent penalty.
According to the text of the bill, the fines would be funneled into a fund that the department would use for projects that deal with student-loan "delinquency and default prevention or rehabilitation." Some of the revenue would also be used to "offset any future shortfalls" in funds for the federal Pell Grant. In addition, the secretary of education would have the authority to waive the penalties in certain cases.

'Pretty Much Indifferent'
The proposed borrower-protection act is the latest in a slew of recent federal initiatives aimed at combating student-loan debt. The Education Department has long had the authority to cut off federal funds for institutions whose default rates exceed a certain threshold. The department's controversial "gainful employment" rule, in its current proposed form, would deny funds to career-oriented programs with default rates that are too high or that fail other tests. The much-discussed college-ratings system at the center of President Obama's higher-education plan would also probably include graduates' debt as a metric.

Mr. Reed said the proposed bill would more effectively drive down levels of student debt, as the Education Department now punishes only "the most extravagant, outrageous schools." He added that the prospect of penalties would get institutions "thinking seriously about their default rates and their practices and the programs they offer."

Ms. Warren added that, currently, institutions are "pretty much indifferent" to the plight of students who are overborrowing or struggling to repay their loans. But, she said, "if a school says, 'Wait a minute, I'll lose money and have to rebate it back to the federal government,' the school has a much more intense interest in making sure students have an opportunity to graduate in four years."

The proposed legislation would hit for-profit institutions the hardest, as their graduates have the highest default rates, on average. In a statement released on Thursday, the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities challenged the effectiveness of the bill.
"Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act is the right way to address these issues, not a piecemeal approach to student outcomes and debt that only applies certain regulations to some institutions and, when combined, may leave low-income students on the outside looking in," the statement said.
New cellphone tower near Providence designed to look like an elm tree

COLUMBIA — A new cellphone tower being constructed to resemble an elm tree poked above the tree line off Providence Road on Thursday.

The tower, which is just south of the MU sports facilities, is replacing a temporary "cow" — a cell tower on wheels — in a location selected "to help off-load demand during MU athletic events," Columbia Development Services Manager Pat Zenner said.

The project is being funded by a private development, St. Charles Tower, which hired US Tower Services Inc. for the construction. The 105-foot tower consists of the typical steel monopole design with branches attached to the outside, US Tower Services job supervisor Shawn Huber said. The design is constructed with plastic leaves and fiberglass branches, which are screwed into the pole with steel rods.

The plot of land is owned by Greg and Misti Post, according to an agenda report from a Planning and Zoning Commission meeting. Huber said the structure is called a stealth tower because it is meant to "blend in with its surroundings." The city staff proposed the idea of a stealth tower — the first in Columbia — to reduce its visual impact, Zenner said.

"We wanted a facility that blended in more with the landscape," he said.

US Tower Services has also made towers that resemble a cactus, pine tree and palm tree.

"They look pretty cool when it's done," Huber said.