

Cancer Research and Prevention Programs Gain Momentum at TTUHSC El Paso

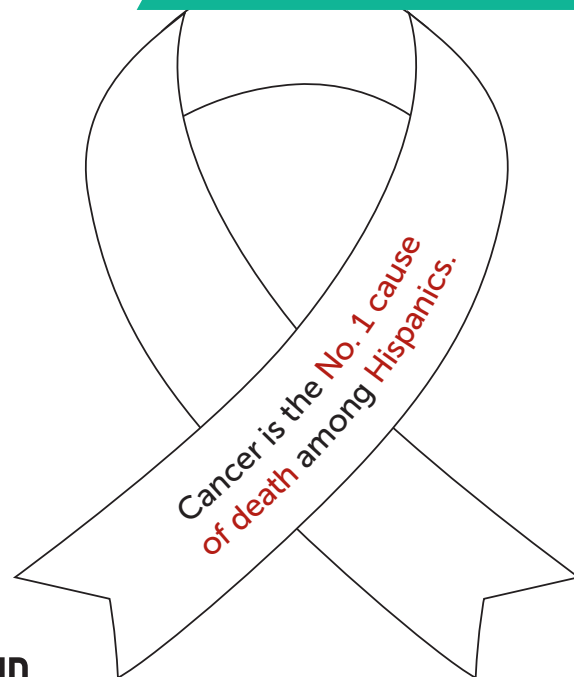
by David Peregrino
Photos by Tommie Morelos

ABSTRACT

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for all Americans. But specific to Hispanics, cancer ranks first as the cause of death, followed by heart disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Understandably, cancer prevention programs and research on cancer treatment have a high priority in far West Texas, where Hispanics make up about 80 percent of the population in El Paso County and neighboring Hudspeth County.

Recent multimillion-dollar grants from the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT) are helping fund the war on cancer at TTUHSC El Paso. In April, the university announced a \$2 million CPRIT Scholar grant that will establish a new laboratory to research novel treatments for breast cancer.



Shrikanth Gadad, PhD

BACKGROUND

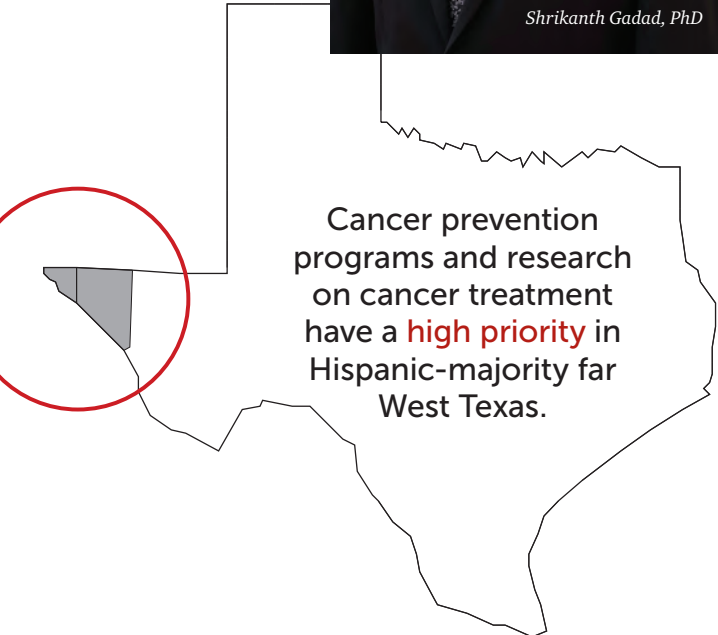
The CPRIT Scholar grant, designed to help in recruiting talented first-time, tenure-track faculty, brings researcher Shrikanth Gadad, PhD, to TTUHSC El Paso. It's a milestone for the Texas Tech University (TTU) System, and the first time the grant has brought a cancer researcher to El Paso, according to CPRIT officials.

Gadad's research will fall under the umbrella of TTUHSC El Paso's Center of Emphasis in Cancer, led by Rajkumar Lakshmanaswamy, PhD, center director and dean of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences.

"The concept that Gadad is bringing in is really new, and it will help us understand the process of cancer growth and how it becomes aggressive," Lakshmanaswamy said. "Using that, we can actually come up with some strategies to prevent the growth of these cancers."

El Paso Mayor Dee Margo, who also serves as assistant presiding officer of the CPRIT Oversight Committee, said Gadad's recruitment is important for El Paso and the Texas border region.

"Having CPRIT Scholar Shrikanth Gadad recruited to TTUHSC El Paso demonstrates our city's status as a serious player in life-sciences research," Margo said. "Cancer disproportionately affects Texans on the border, and this requires us to build a stronger cancer-fighting ecosystem right here to study how best to address these disparities. I congratulate Dr. Gadad and the entire team at TTUHSC El Paso on this milestone in developing a world-class cancer research program."



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METHODOLOGY

In pursuing new treatments for breast cancer, Gadad has been studying genes known as long noncoding RNAs. His research has shown that certain types of these biomolecules appear to function as tumor growers or tumor suppressors.

“This is a very fascinating subject for me—examining the less-studied elements of the human genome to uncover possible treatments for cancer,” said Gadad. “We want to know if we can use these elements of the genome as cancer biomarkers or therapy targets. This is the focus of my lab in El Paso.”




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CONCLUSION

TTUHSC El Paso has put breast cancer in its crosshairs because it is the leading cause of cancer death for Hispanic women. Nearly 20,000 new cases of the disease are diagnosed in Hispanic women each year, according to the American Cancer Society.

Gadad's lab will complement the work of Navkiran Shokar, MD, MPH, MA, vice chair for research and director for Cancer Prevention and Control at TTUHSC El Paso. Shokar is responsible for bringing \$14.7 million in CPRIT grant funds to the university since 2011 as principal investigator of several cancer prevention programs.

“This kind of funding for services is incredibly important for our West Texas communities that suffer significant disparities in socioeconomic status, access to care and health insurance,” Shokar said. “Furthermore, through developing and implementing these programs we are also able to learn how best to promote behaviors that improve health.” 

ADDITIONAL GRANT FUNDING

In addition to the CPRIT Scholar grant, CPRIT awarded Navkiran Shokar, MD, MPH, MA, vice chair for research in the Paul L. Foster School of Medicine Department of Family and Community Medicine and director for Cancer Prevention and Control at TTUHSC El Paso, a \$1.5 million cancer prevention grant to support the Breast Cancer Education Screening and Navigation (BEST) program for El Paso and West Texas. The grant will help expand BEST program services to over 20 counties in the region. In collaboration with community health organizations, BEST offers culturally-tailored breast cancer education and no-cost mammograms to eligible participants. Program navigators also assist women through the often-complex processes of obtaining health insurance coverage and accessing screening, diagnostic and treatment services. Funds of \$1.5 million for the *De Casa en Casa* (house to house) program were also awarded, which helps uninsured or underinsured Hispanic women access free cervical cancer screenings.

CPRIT was established in 2007 by the state of Texas to expedite innovation and expand the capacity for cancer research at Texas universities and other organizations. Since 2009, the agency has awarded more than \$58 million to the TTU System.