



**Embargoed until 10 a.m. Monday, April 14, 2008**

Contact:

Jim Spencer 303-315-0554; 720-346-4242 [jim.spencer@uchsc.edu](mailto:jim.spencer@uchsc.edu)

Jacque Montgomery 303-724-1528; 303-928-9093 [jacque.montgomery@uchsc.edu](mailto:jacque.montgomery@uchsc.edu)

## **\$3 Million Gift Launches Depression Center, Starts National Network**

AURORA, Colo. (April 14, 2008) – George Wieggers spent too much of his childhood watching depression ravage his mother. Monday, Wieggers made an extraordinary contribution to help ease the suffering from an illness that kills roughly 30,000 Americans a year and cripples millions of others. Wieggers donated \$3 million to establish the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine Depression Center.

The center becomes the second in what is designed to be a 12-to-14-institution national network that will attack mental illness the way other medical centers have cooperated to attack cancer and heart disease.

“We have to blow away the stigma and bring mental health out of the closet the way we did with cancer 20 years ago,” said Wieggers, a New York investment banker, who retired to Colorado in the mid-1990s. “The country should have an infrastructure for depression, such as it has for cancer.”

The University of Michigan launched the national network’s first depression center in 2001, with the goal of eventually linking with other such centers. That goal, the brainchild of Michigan Depression Center director John Greden, MD, began to take shape soon after the Michigan center opened its new building in 2006. Representatives from a number of institutions, including the UC Denver School of Medicine, came together at the Michigan facility in April 2007 to set in motion plans for a national network.

Wieggers’ gift will allow Colorado’s center to open by August 2008 in renovated offices in the old Fitzsimons Army Hospital, now called Building 500 on the UC Denver Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora.

“My mother was bipolar,” Wieggers said. “I grew up with her in the hospital a lot of time. I saw the ravages of depression. We need national insurance coverage for mental health just like we have for other physical disorders.”

Colorado First Lady Jeannie Ritter, a strong advocate for mental health care, accepted Wiegiers' gift on behalf of the state's citizens.

"These kinds of projects show how far we've come in treating mental illness just the way we do physical illness," Mrs. Ritter said during ceremonies Monday morning at the Anschutz campus. "We must continue to do everything we can to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness and improve access to mental health care."

Wiegiers is a former trustee of the CU Foundation, which facilitated his gift, and a former national chairman of Trout Unlimited. His wife, Elizabeth, has established a fellowship in the English Department at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her husband's contribution for the Depression Center at the School of Medicine has already fueled enthusiasm among other potential members of the National Network of Depression Centers, Greden said. "This step is having a contagious effect in a very positive way. We will get answers to depression and bipolar disorder when we have studies involving 4,000 to 10,000 patients, like cancer research."

Some in that pool of patients will now be from Colorado and the rest of the Rocky Mountain region.

"The University of Colorado Denver is happy to provide a home to this important endeavor," said UC Denver Chancellor M. Roy Wilson, MD, MS. "For a number of years, our researchers have been working to solve complex mental health issues and we are pleased to join our existing talents with George Wiegiers' vision."

UC Denver Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs and School of Medicine Dean Richard Krugman, MD, added: "This is a wonderful gift that will allow us to advance the science and improve the care for individuals with depression and their families. It comes to a superb group of faculty who will join their colleagues at Michigan in this very important work."

A broad-based, cooperative approach is critical to improving diagnosis, treatment and maintaining good health, agreed Marshall Thomas, MD, the UC Denver medical school psychiatrist who will direct Colorado's Depression Center.

"From a research perspective, you've got to be part of a national network to have findings of substance," Thomas said.

A center known for excellent treatment can also help overcome the stigma that mental illnesses are somehow less serious or less treatable than other illnesses. As Thomas explained: "Depression and mood disorders are real illnesses with treatment outcomes that are similar to other chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease."

Recently, the devastation of depression has played out tragically among U.S. military veterans returning from Iraq with post traumatic stress disorder. Suicide rates among

these service men and women are multiples of the overall national rate, and research shows that depression plays a role in the vast majority of suicides.

“The biggest issues right now are suicide among people 10 to 24 years old and suicide in returning combat veterans,” said Robert Freedman, MD, chairman of the medical school’s Department of Psychiatry and research director of a special nationwide VA Center for Suicide in Veterans. “The UC Denver Depression Center will work closely with the VA and with the University of Colorado Denver psychiatry service at Children’s Hospital on suicide in these two groups.”

The center will combine academic disciplines to treat depression comprehensively.

“We will provide multidisciplinary evaluations and treatments that address the psychological, biological, social system, and other health-related issues that plunge patients into depression,” Thomas said. In addition, the center will emphasize research, community education and a special outreach to primary care doctors, who most often see the first symptoms of depression. To that end, Frank DeGruy, MD, chair of family medicine at the medical school, attended the organizational meeting in Michigan for the National Network of Depression Centers. A “centers of excellence, evidence-based, multi-disciplinary” approach also will help doctors address cases where patients have been diagnosed and treated, but have not received much relief.

Difficult-to-treat depression is found in roughly 30 percent of patients who seek help, said the University of Michigan’s Greden.

It was one of those difficult situations that initially inspired George Wieggers. In November 2006, Wieggers read an op-ed essay in the *New York Times* entitled “Our Great Depression.” The writer, Andrew Solomon, suffers from recurrent depression. Solomon also serves on the University of Michigan Depression Center advisory committee. His explanation of the hoped-for national network inspired Wieggers to travel twice to Ann Arbor at his own expense.

“Last summer, I got a call from someone I didn’t know,” Greden said. “It was George Wieggers. I quickly learned that he is a relatively quiet man. But he had a very straightforward way of wanting to make a difference.”

As for Wieggers, he says simply: “I was fortunate to have saved some money. And I thought I’d use it.”

Wieggers hopes his gift will inspire enough additional gifts to sustain the Depression Center and let it expand its reach. He has formed a foundation – the Institute for Depression Studies and Treatment – so that others can follow his example.

“The institute will work with the CU Foundation to assure continued support of the Depression Center,” Freedman said.

The [School of Medicine](#) faculty work to advance science and improve care as the physicians, educators and scientists at University of Colorado Hospital, The Children's Hospital, Denver Health, National Jewish Medical and Research Center, and the Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Degrees offered by the UC Denver School of Medicine include doctor of medicine, doctor of physical therapy, and masters of physician assistant studies. The School is part of the [University of Colorado Denver](#), one of three universities in the University of Colorado system. For additional news and information, please visit the [UC Denver newsroom](#) online.