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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 11, 2009

UCSF Fresno program offers treatment for Valley patients with complex lung diseases

FRESNO – Pulmonary hypertension (PH), which is high blood pressure in the lungs, and interstitial lung disease (ILD), commonly referred to as “lung scarring,” represent a complex and diverse group of lung diseases that have many potential causes. They demand specialized expertise for both diagnosis and treatment. Left untreated, these conditions are often fatal

Approximately 20 years ago, there were no treatments for PH and the outlook for patients diagnosed with this disorder was grim. Today, many advances have been made and effective treatments are available, including locally. The UCSF Fresno-affiliated Pulmonary Hypertension - Interstitial Lung Disease (PH-ILD) Program specializes in the diagnosis and management of patients with PH and ILD.

UCSF Fresno faculty members Vijay P. Balasubramanian, MD; Timothy Evans, MD; Richard Bertken, MD; and Ralph Wessel, MD, launched the program one year ago. All have extensive experience in the evaluation and treatment of patients with PH.

PH and ILD are relatively common conditions. The incidence of PH across the nation is steadily rising – there were 20,000 cases in 1980 compared with 180,000 in 2001. More common in women, the causes of PH range from genetic causes to the effects of other conditions such as lupus or respiratory disease to exposure to toxins as found in diet pills or illicit drugs. In many cases of PH the cause is unknown.

Symptoms of PH include unexplained shortness of breath, fatigue, chest pain, dizziness and fainting.

“Pulmonary hypertension is an under recognized disease,” said Balasubramanian. “It is difficult to diagnose because symptoms are often attributed to other conditions. By creating awareness of PH and offering treatment locally, our aim is to improve the outcome of patients with the disease.”

Efforts are already paying off.

Donna Johns, 60, formerly of Los Angeles, moved to Fresno three and a half years ago. In August 2008, she was rushed to the hospital after passing out in the shower. Johns, who is diabetic, was having trouble breathing and had fluid in her lungs.

Balasubramanian was working in the medical intensive care unit that evening. He reviewed Johns' case and diagnosed her with PH.

Johns was previously thought to be asthmatic. For the past several months, she has been receiving treatment through the UCSF Fresno PH-ILD Program. She is on oxygen 24-hours a day and on dosed medications to reduce blood pressure in her lungs.

According to Johns, she has improved tremendously. She is breathing better, able to walk and take a bath – simple things that seemed impossible after she collapsed last August.

“I didn't know that I had PH,” said Johns. “I know more about it now, but I'm still learning.”

“I was very fortunate that Dr. Bala [subramanian] was there,” she added. “I don't think I would be here if it weren't for him.”

Importantly, the PH-ILD Program provides opportunity for specialized training in this field for both pulmonary and cardiology fellows at UCSF Fresno. Clinical research is under way and this program paves the way for more research into this complex set of lung diseases.

“This is another example of UCSF Fresno's ongoing success in recruiting top-notch faculty who possess the expertise and ability to provide high quality care for Valley patients as well as grow our teaching program to educate the next generation of physicians,” said Joan Voris, MD, associate dean at UCSF Fresno.

For more information about UCSF Fresno's PH-ILD Program, please call (559) 320-1090.

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UCSF Fresno Medical Education Program plays a substantial role in providing healthcare services to residents of California's San Joaquin Valley and training medical professionals in the region. The medical education program has trained approximately one-third of Central San Joaquin Valley physicians currently practicing in one of the seven specialties in which it provides training. Since its inception more than 30 years ago, UCSF Fresno has graduated more than 2,000 resident physicians. UCSF Fresno faculty and medical residents care for the overwhelming majority of the area's underserved populations. On an annual basis, the program currently trains about 200 medical residents, nearly 200 medical students and a number of fellows in cardiology, critical care, hospitalist, infectious disease, minimal invasive surgery, pulmonary medicine and wilderness medicine. UCSF Fresno also provides academic preparation programs for middle- and high school students interested in the health professions through the Doctor's Academy and Junior Doctor's Academy. UCSF Fresno is a key partner in UC Merced's proposed School of Medicine and is expected to play a significant role in the training of medical students at the planned school.