

UA Arthritis Center's virtual fundraiser includes panel talk, reception

By Loni Nannini Special to the Arizona Daily Star | Sep 8, 2020

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UA Arthritis Center Director Dr. C. Kent Kwoh, left, has invited Dr. Janko Nikolich-Zugich, chairman of the Department of Immunobiology, to talk about his role in the development of the UA COVID-19 antibody test. *Kris Hanning / UA Health Sciences BioCommunications*

In the midst of most crises — including a global pandemic — Arizona Wildcats know the best plan is to bear down.

Wildcat fans worldwide will have the opportunity to do so virtually with the 2020 University of Arizona Arthritis Center “Bear Down for Health: Sport and Science in the Era of COVID-19” livestream panel discussion and reception at 11 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 16.

The free online event, which will be followed by a virtual reception fundraiser to benefit the center, will focus on the future of college athletics at the UA and on a national level while highlighting the scientific and public health impact of COVID-19.

Special guests for the discussion include UA athletics director Dave Heeke; Dr. Daniel Derksen, UA Health Sciences associate vice president for health equity, outreach and interprofessional activities; and Dr. Janko Nikolich-Zugich, chair of the Department of Immunobiology at the College of Medicine-Tucson and co-director of the UA Center on Aging.

“We’re very fortunate to have this group of experts here at the University of Arizona for this very timely topic. We’re extremely grateful that they have made time in their busy schedules to come together to address this topic for our Bear Down for Health virtual event. Their expertise and perspectives will be relevant to a broad audience in these challenging times, beyond the impact of COVID-19 on sports,” said Arthritis Center Director Dr. C. Kent Kwoh.

Kwoh expects the virtual discussion and reception, which will include an interactive question-and-answer session, to appeal to all ages and life stages.

Nikolich-Zugich is excited about the opportunity to discuss his role as principal investigator in development of the UA COVID-19 antibody test, which recently received full FDA approval and is available to the public at 30-plus locations statewide. Financial support from the state of Arizona seeks to facilitate testing for at least 250,000 people; more than 25,000 have taken the test to date.

“This is a voluntary test, so it is difficult to predict how many people will end up testing. A lot will depend on the spread of COVID-19 in the community. There is no set goal, but this and similar tests will give us an idea of how much of the population may have immunity. We are still low as a state, probably in the range of 5 to 7%,” said Nikolich-Zugich, whose efforts are central to the UA’s Test, Trace and Treat COVID-19 Response Plan.

He said he is cautiously optimistic about the plan.

“We are dealing with young people that are at the age where risky behavior abounds. Our plan can be — and is — very good, but it will all depend on the collaboration of every staff, student and faculty member,” he said.

During the event, Nikolich-Zugich said he looks forward to countering some of the misinformation that is circulating about various aspects of COVID-19, including immunity.

Nikolich-Zugich said there are still many unknowns about the virus, including the length of immunity in people who had mild symptoms or no symptoms.

“Our studies show that even in these people, antibodies last for at least three months. There usually is a relationship between dose of the virus and the intensity of the immune response. What that will mean in terms of length of immunity at the lower SARS-CoV2 virus doses, we don’t know yet,” he said.

Overall, Nikolich-Zugich also anticipates offering people important takeaways about the pandemic. He emphasized the importance of not underestimating the virus.

“Thinking it is not going to hit you is not a good strategy. This virus can kill you, even if you are young and healthy, and you can also transmit it to family members who are more vulnerable than you. Hopefully those facts have become clear to everyone,” he said.

In addition, Nikolich-Zugich encouraged people to stay the course using masks and social-distancing, and to continue to stay informed as more science surrounding the virus unfolds.

“This is not our normal life. The virus is not allowing us to interact normally and have fun. It has been one big slog and ordeal, and we are wearing masks and being socially distant, but we don’t have many other tools. This is not a virus with a political color. No virus I have seen before has voted, but they kill indiscriminately and if we ignore them, they will do what they have evolved to do. Only we can stop them,” he said.