Distributed by UW News Service, May 12, 2025

Link to original story: <https://www.uwlax.edu/news/posts/hope-beyond-no-cure-conditions/>

**Hope beyond ‘no cure’ conditions**

### **UW-La Crosse students explore new evidence for Parkinson’s and other chronic conditions**

Written by UW-La Crosse University Marketing & Communications

For a patient, few things are as discouraging as hearing, “There’s no cure for your condition.” At UW-La Crosse, Naghmeh Gheidi is preparing future [occupational therapy](https://www.uwlax.edu/academics/grad/occupational-therapy/) (OT) professionals who can add a hopeful “but” to that statement.

Over the past two years, Gheidi, along with UWL OT clinicians, has guided students through multiple research studies aimed at finding new rehabilitations and interventions for chronic health conditions that currently have no complete cure. These include chronic pain, pelvic floor dysfunction, chronic edema, and Parkinson’s disease.

As part of her research courses, Gheidi’s students are learning to research and apply evidence-based practices — such as visual and auditory cues, exercises, and other interventions — to help patients manage and, in some cases, improve their conditions. The goal: to help patients regain the ability to enjoy the activities they love.

“There’s a real need for more scholarly clinicians, not just clinicians who follow existing protocols,” Gheidi says. “A clinician addresses problems based on what’s known, but a scholarly clinician thinks outside the box to find solutions based on the latest evidence and the patient’s unique needs.”

First-year OT students Maggie Cristoforo and Hailey Carlson are in the middle of a two-year long research study on Parkinson’s disease that aims to create new evidence-based rehabilitation options for patients. Their research will help understand the impact of cues such as visual or audio signals for these patients who struggle to make the proper neural connections as they move from sitting to standing position — a fundamental action essential to daily activities like sitting down for meals or standing up to answer the door.

They will be using 15 cameras and over 50 reflective markers to measure the body mechanics of Parkinson’s patients as they transition from sitting to standing.

“I think it is good to constantly evaluate and give people as much independence as they could potentially have,” says Carlson. “Having this first-hand experience makes us better at interpreting results and applying our own interventions. Hopefully, it will have a positive effect for patients down the road.”

Gheidi says research is the best way for students to learn. Her passion for research began as a doctoral student in Iran.

“The word for ‘student’ in my language is ‘Daneshjoo’ — someone who is looking for knowledge,” she says. “It’s about being curious and finding the answers, not just waiting to be told and memorizing the information.”

Gheidi says her students’ creativity and enthusiasm for research continually surprises and inspires her.

“I love working with them. They constantly come up with new ideas that push the boundaries of what I thought was possible,” she says. “Research gives me purpose. Holding a Ph.D. label for me is about contributing to knowledge that can truly make a difference. If we don’t do any research, then we don’t know.” Her goal is to involve students and clinicians in research, helping them become scholarly practitioners and contribute to the growing body of evidence-based practice.

**Some key findings from Gheidi’s students’ research include:**

**Parkinson’s disease study:** Launched in fall 2022, this study initially sought to understand how many people with Parkinson’s in the La Crosse area were aware of OT interventions. The results revealed that most patients were unaware of the help OT could offer. A year later, Gheidi and her students began investigating the impact of external cues — such as visual or auditory signals — on moving from a sitting position to walking. They found that these cues didn’t necessarily speed up the transition from sitting to walking, but they did make the movement safer.  The result of this study was submitted to be presented at the American Society of Biomechanics (ASB) in August 2025. Gheidi was awarded a Mayo UWL Seed Grant to further explore how cueing affects movement in Parkinson’s patients and their brain activity, and her students are continuing that work this spring semester with a study on the impact of cueing from sitting to standing position. “This would not have been possible without the excellent facilities in the La Crosse Institute for Movement Science (LIMS) lab, made possible through years of dedicated effort by the LIMS’s founding director, Dr. Thomas Kernozek.” Gheidi says.

**Pelvic floor dysfunction study:** Many women experience pelvic floor dysfunction after childbirth, but they often assume it’s something they just must live with.  Gheidi’s students and clinical assistant professor, Kim Servias completed two studies in this area. They researched the impact of Pelvic Floor Dysfunction (PFD) on Occupations in Middle-Age Women and OT-based interventions to help women manage and improve this condition. They found that after just four weeks of intervention, women felt better about their activity goals and, after eight weeks, reported fewer symptoms. Both studies were presented at American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) conference in 2024, and 2025.

**Chronic pain study:**The team of Gheidi’s students and clinical assistant professor, Brandon McCauley also looked into the use of cognitive behavioral techniques (CBT) for chronic pain management. Through a survey of clinicians, they discovered many were unaware that CBT could be used without special certification. The study helped raise awareness among OT practitioners. This study was presented at American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) conference in 2024. In a current project, Gheidi's students, along with Clinical Assistant Professors, McCauley and Polly Berra, are examining chronic pain from the perspectives of occupational therapy practitioners and exploring the challenges they face.

**Chronic edema study:**Collaborating with the American Lymphedema Framework Project (ALFP) and the Lymphology Association of North America (LANA), Gheidi’s students and McCauley researched the impact of the Lymphedema Treatment Act (which went into effect in 2024) on treatment for patients. The study helped inform clinicians about this new law and its potential to improve treatment access for patients with chronic swelling through insurance coverage for compression supplies.

Cristoforo says her work on Parkinson’s disease is the most involved she’s ever been in a research project. “I’ve gone from just following instructions as an undergrad to having a bigger role in planning and executing our study,” she says. “It’s empowering to have a say in the research process.”

The class is the most collaborative one she has been a part of at UWL because everyone is so passionate about the field and the research they are doing, she says.  A former certified nursing assistant, Cristofo is excited to continue on her path in healthcare. “Through OT, I saw that I could not only be an aid to someone, but I could make them more independent, so maybe one day they wouldn’t need my help.”

Carlson looks forward to making that difference in many lives.

“I’m really interested in getting people back to what they like to do. Not just moving their arm or leg but moving their arm to play the guitar or do something meaningful to them,” she says.

**Research Achievements**

Under Gheidi’s mentorship, UWL OT students have made significant strides in their research projects. Here are some of the accomplishments over the past two years:

* Four research studies are currently in the data collection phase.
* Four more studies are in the data processing stage.
* Five research studies were presented last year
* Five student research grants have been accepted and funded.
* Two faculty research grants have been awarded.
* One external grant from the Mayo Clinic Health System has been received.
* Three national presentations have been made at the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) conference.
* Two research manuscripts are currently in progress.

Gheidi is proud of her students’ dedication and achievements, and she’s thankful for the support she’s received from OT Program Director Laura Schaffer and Dr. Kernozek, chair of the Health Professions Department. “I am standing on the shoulders of many people. Their openness and support have been invaluable,” she says. “Dr. Kernozek, in particular, has been an incredible mentor. And Laura’s positive attitude, combined with her genuine trust in and support for others, creates motivating environment that inspires me to do my best.”