

# Anna's Angels Foundation

Cary organization spearheads national medical research.

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When Michelle Pfeiffer's little girl, Anna, was diagnosed with leukemia at 16 months old, Pfeiffer remembers what the doctor said to her. "Right after he told us she had leukemia, the next thing he said was, 'We're grateful she has Down syndrome,'" the Cary mom recalled.

Her doctor went on to explain that kids with Down syndrome have a higher leukemia survival rate and require fewer drugs for treatment than those in the general population. While it's not known why this is the case, its relevance can't be ignored. "If we can understand why the difference exists, we can apply that knowledge to helping other patients in the general population with leukemia, too," explained Dr. Joseph St. Geme, chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Duke University Medical Center.

Pfeiffer was intrigued by this relationship between health issues in individuals with Down syndrome and those in the general population. Inspired by their daughter,

Pfeiffer and her husband started Anna's Angels, The Anna Michelle Merrills Foundation for Down Syndrome Research. Together with Duke Children's Hospital, the foundation issues annual grants, with 100 percent of donations going toward funding valuable medical research. The results? Since 2004, the foundation has funded the following four important studies.

#### Iron Deficiency Anemia

"Iron is key to brain development – and your energy level," said Pfeiffer. But when testing for iron deficiency anemia, individuals with Down syndrome were often going undiagnosed. The research funded by Anna's Angels Foundation allows researchers to expand the traditional anemia test to help identify individuals with Down syndrome who may be anemic. "We know iron deficiency anemia is very important to identify in children in general," added Dr. St. Geme. Detailed testing, such as that



Anna Merrills

funded by the foundation, will help improve identification and treatment of anemia across the population.

#### Alzheimer's Disease

Another grant funded in 2004 looked at the Alzheimer's drug, Rivastigmine. "Individuals with Down syndrome have a higher development rate of Alzheimer's," Pfeiffer explained. "The researchers looked at Down syndrome adolescents treated with this drug to see if it helps improve cognition." The grant allows researchers to continue the study to determine the safety and efficacy of long-term use of Rivastigmine – an impact that could be felt by Alzheimer's patients in the future."

#### Cardiac Defects

Another common health issue for individuals with Down syndrome involves cardiac abnormalities. In 2005, the foundation funded a grant for researchers to study atrial septal defect – when a hole is present in the septum dividing the two sides of the heart. "Atrial septal and ventricular septal defects are among the most common defects that exist," said Dr. St. Geme. "This particular study is looking at two different genes and examining their role in atrial septal defect."

#### National Down Syndrome Registry

Another grant funded in 2005 will establish a national Down syndrome registry, allowing researchers to share valuable information across the country. "We know that these various conditions – for example, heart defects, leukemia and iron deficiency – are very common in patients with Down syndrome, more common than in the general population," said Dr. St. Geme. By collecting detailed information on large populations – via the registry – researchers and clinicians may be able to identify other abnormalities and share information to help treat and diagnose patients.

Pfeiffer is pleased that the foundation's efforts will not only help Down syndrome individuals, but also extend far beyond into the general population. "There are so many medical issues that individuals with Down syndrome face – like leukemia, cardiac defects, Alzheimer's and iron deficiency anemia," Pfeiffer explained. "Research in Down syndrome will not only help these individuals, but also unlock keys to issues that affect the general population. So, we can really help both."

For more information on Anna's Angels Foundation, visit [www.annas-angels.org](http://www.annas-angels.org).

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All proceeds go directly to Down Syndrome and Leukemia research. Anna's Angels is a non-profit organization affiliated with Duke Children's Hospital.

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