



Awareness

Award Recognizes Farmington Man's Devotion to Working With Seniors

Dr. Peter Lichtenberg's latest project is a tool that can help elders avoid being scammed.

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Since Sept. 16, 1986, Farmington resident Dr. Peter Lichtenberg has devoted his career to working with his elders.

Earlier this month, he received an award that recognizes a life-time of contributions to the field of psychology and aging. Lichtenberg continues to explore new ways to improve the quality of life for seniors; a project he expects to complete next year will help elders avoid losing their life savings to scams.

Now head of the Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology (IOG), Lichtenberg, 53, traveled to Orlando, FL to accept the prestigious American Psychological Association Committee on Aging Award for the Advancement of Psychology and Aging. The award recognizes his professional and volunteer efforts to advance a field he chose very early in life.

Lichtenberg said the older members of his own family, and their "dignity and resilience in the face of hardships", inspired him to choose the geriatrics specialty.

"My mother remembers in high school I told her I wanted to be a psychologist and work with older adults," he said.

A leader and mentor

Dr. Jennifer Moyer, who serves as director of Geriatric Mental Health for VA Boston Healthcare System and associate professor at Harvard Medical School, said Lichtenberg's professional accomplishments are just part of the reason he was nominated and chosen for the award.



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"He has served and continues to serve as a leader in many of our professional organizations," she said, adding he has also mentored the careers of many others. "I, myself, have benefited from his mentorship – he has given me critical advice on journal articles and negotiating complex professional situations, and has supported my career advancement. Our field is full of grateful people like myself who are so pleased that Dr. Lichtenberg has been recognized for his contributions."

Calling it "the biggest thrill of my career", Lichtenberg has since 1998 served as director of the Institute of Gerontology (IOG) at Wayne State University. In addition to research, attracting nationally recognized scholars and training graduate students, the IOG has developed "the most significant community engagement ever, by any graduate program", he added.

The IOG reaches out annually to about 3,500 elders in metro Detroit through the "Art of Aging" conference, which after 14 years is still organized with the help of older adult volunteers, the "Healthy Black Elders" initiative, and a "Windows to the World" speakers bureau.

The Institute also trains professionals who work with older adults, improving their understanding of the complex interactions needed to help people with complex problems, Lichtenberg said. The goal is to ensure elders maintain their autonomy and individual preferences as long as possible.

Helping elders avoid scams

Lichtenberg said his career is in transition; because his wife, Susan, has been ill, he has moved away from national activities and into new areas of research and practice. Among his recent projects is an assessment tool to help elders who are making financial decisions.

The tool aims to look at a person's abilities, their finances, values and other factors, and create a scale that gives them some guidance in decision-making and lowers the risk that someone will take advantage of them. The idea, Lichtenberg explained, is to balance the need to protect people with respect for their autonomy.

"In our research on scams, we've found people who are psychologically vulnerable are 300 percent more likely to be scammed," he said. "There are high reports of depressive feelings and reports they were treated with less respect. That's the part we're trying to assess, the vulnerability and undue influence."

He expects to have the assessment tool reviewed by a national panel around this time next year.

The father of three children, Emily, Thomas and Sophie, Lichtenberg said having personal contact with seniors during his career has also added much to his personal life.

"I find it very uplifting," he said. "Their gift of friendship is exceptional. It's so much like I had all my life with my family ... Older people I've worked with are so appreciative. They don't take your time and effort for granted."

As Lichtenberg looks ahead to his own "golden years", he is trying to take the lessons he has learned from his friends into his own life: "being on the move, exercising, increasing my creativity ... trying to make sure I don't miss out on all the important relationships in my life, and not let work crowd those out."