

Small Grants. Big Leverage.

Dr. Edna Cukierman · Fox Chase Cancer Center

2026 Mid-Year Progress Report, in plain language. Dr. Edna Cukierman leads a pancreatic cancer prevention program at Fox Chase Cancer Center that the Foundation has supported for more than three decades. Her April 2026 report describes real progress this year.

THE PROBLEM

Pancreatic cancer is one of the deadliest cancers — only about 1 in 8 patients survive five years, largely because it is usually found too late.

THE APPROACH

Dr. Cukierman's team targets the supportive tissue around a tumor, aiming to stop it from becoming cancer-friendly.

AHEPA'S ROLE

AHEPA-funded work identified the biological “switch” that turns this neighborhood cancer-promoting, and is now funding the search for a drug that can block it.

THE PATH FROM LAB BENCH TO PATIENT — WHERE THIS YEAR'S WORK LANDED

01	02	03	04	05
DISCOVERY	LAB TESTING	DEVELOPMENT	ANIMAL STUDIES	FDA PREP
Tumor switch found	Tools tested	Drug candidates	40% reduction	Future translation

* AHEPA-funded tools carried this project from Discovery into first Animal Studies this year.

WHAT HAPPENED THIS YEAR

Major Accomplishments, First Half of 2026

- Completed a key research phase (“Aim 2”): lab-grown, 3-D tissue models confirmed that AHEPA-funded antibodies out-perform commercial alternatives at blocking the cancer-promoting switch.
- Built a first-of-its-kind automated lab platform that photographs and scores thousands of cell samples without human bias — then published the method openly so labs worldwide can use it.
- Ran the first live-animal experiments: AHEPA-funded antibodies produced a 40% reduction in high-grade precancerous lesions compared to untreated controls — real, measurable proof the approach works.
- Launched two new drug-design tracks for the second half of 2026: 19 AI-designed small-molecule candidates now being synthesized, plus a next-generation peptide program addressing an immune-response issue found in the first prototypes.

LEVERAGE IN ACTION — ONE INVESTMENT, TWO BREAKTHROUGHS

The automated screening technology AHEPA helped fund for drug discovery has now done double duty. The very same imaging pipeline was formally cited in a newly published study connecting this lab work to a completed pancreatic-cancer clinical trial in real patients — showing that standard chemotherapy and radiation can, unexpectedly, make the tumor's surroundings **more** cancer-friendly, not less. That is precisely the problem this AHEPA-funded project was designed to solve.

By the Numbers

5	6	19	30+
Publications acknowledging AHEPA support	Invited national & international talks	AI-designed drug candidates advancing to testing	Years of AHEPA-Fox Chase partnership

National Recognition Fueled by This Work

- Appointed to the NCI Working Group on Extramural Research Concepts and Programs — one of only 35 national experts advising federal cancer research priorities.
- Named Chair of the AACR Tumor Microenvironment Working Group, and Co-Chair of the AACR 2026 Annual Meeting Scientific Program.
- Selected to lead a new NIH-funded undergraduate research training program, opening doors for the next generation of scientists.

Looking ahead: In the second half of 2026, Dr. Cukierman's team will screen all 19 AI-designed drug candidates and advance the new peptide program — using the very tools AHEPA helped build.

"We are deeply grateful for the Fifth District AHEPA Cancer Research Foundation's unwavering support across our 30+ year relationship with Fox Chase Cancer Center."

— Edna Cukierman, PhD · Founding Director, Greenberg Pancreatic Cancer Institute

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