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Science and art converge to battle scoliosis

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A Simon Fraser University scientist and a Vancouver dancer are launching a free public forum series to stimulate research on preventing idiopathic scoliosis.

Idiopathic refers to the fact the cause of this spine-deforming condition is unknown.

Kristen Fay Gorman, an SFU biologist, will present her pioneering research on the use of curveback guppies as a model for studying human idiopathic scoliosis at Seriously Twisted Salon 1.0 on Saturday, Sept. 11.

Martha Carter, a dancer and choreographer living with the condition, is the organizer of the salon, the first in a series of public forums to be held at the mmHoP shop at 150 McLean St. The event is from 6 to 9 p.m.

The mmHoP (Marta Marta House of Pride) shop is Carter's dance studio and the home of the Twisted Outreach Project, which features various events, including this forum series, to educate the public about idiopathic scoliosis.

Carter and Gorman met through a surgeon who had operated on Carter's deformed spine and reviewed Gorman's discovery that guppies with the same condition could help unravel its genetic development in humans.

They cemented their bond after Gorman saw Carter perform Twisted, a multi-media presentation about her experience of scoliosis in Vancouver.

'As scientists we're quite removed from the patient population and to connect with people who can communicate clearly and powerfully about their experience of a condition we're researching is invaluable,' says Gorman.

The post-doctoral researcher, who made her discovery while completing her doctoral thesis under SFU biologist Felix Breden, adds, 'Ongoing communication and feedback from patients like Carter helps us uncover previously unexplored research avenues.'

Carter, who has interviewed Breden and Gorman and filmed them in their lab for a documentary she is producing about scoliosis, says, 'Gorman's research is very exciting. It is the first to open up roads for exploring ways of preventing this disease and using effective drugs to manage it.'

The two hope their forum series will lead to a national conference that informs everyone from students and performers to medical and bodywork practitioners and patients about idiopathic scoliosis.

At its severest, the disease strikes, on average, three to four per cent of the global population, physically and emotionally crippling primarily girls reaching puberty.

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