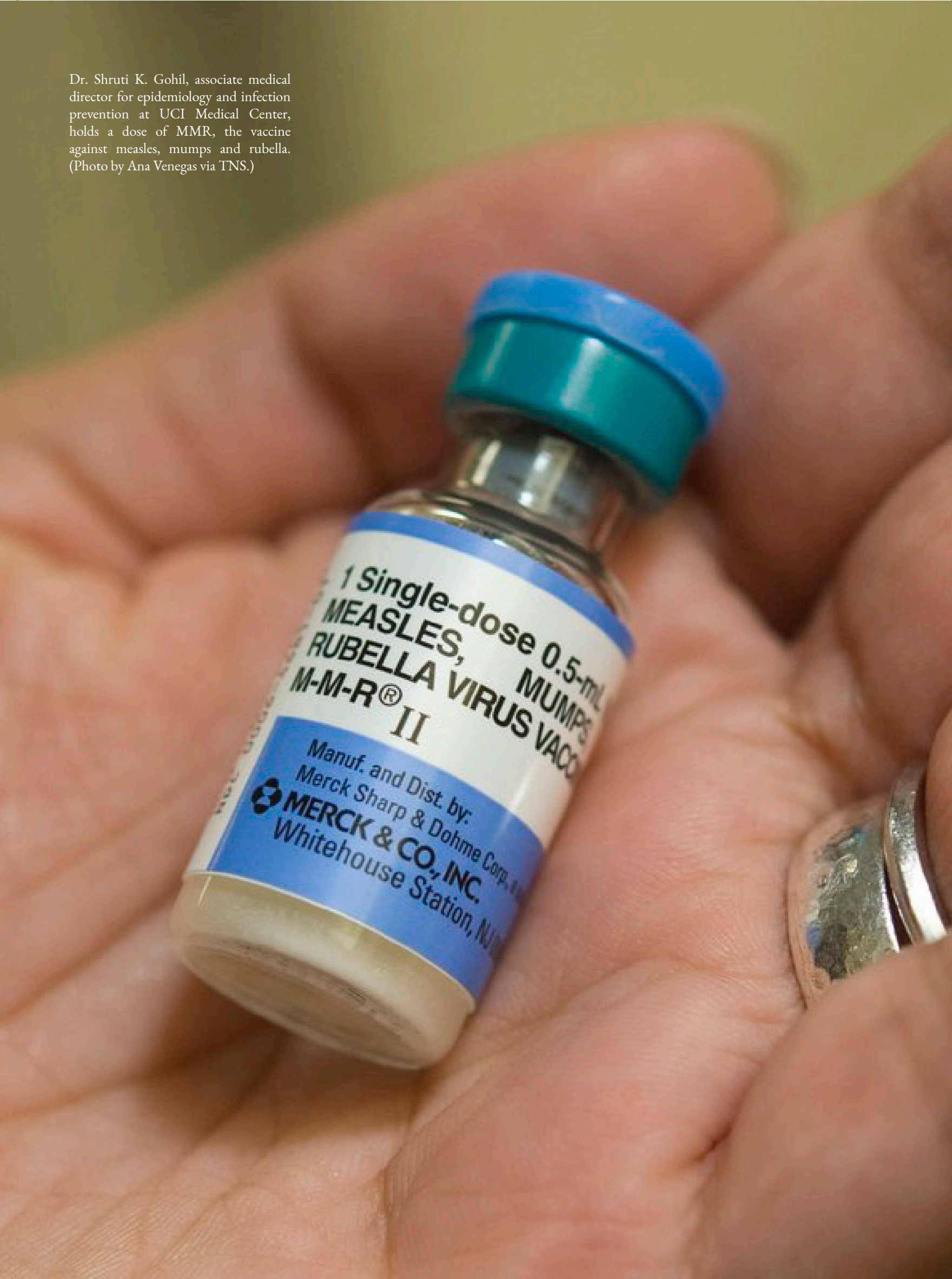


Dr. Shruti K. Gohil, associate medical director for epidemiology and infection prevention at UCI Medical Center, holds a dose of MMR, the vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella. (Photo by Ana Venegas via TNS.)



TRIAL RUN

Elon's first health crisis

Months before the novel coronavirus had even appeared in China, before the Elon community received weekly updates from Vice President for Student Life Jon Dooley about the global pandemic, students and staff received updates about a local outbreak plaguing campus: mumps. From September to January, the university reported 15 cases.

Professor of Public Health *Cynthia Fair* told Phi Psi Cli the outbreak inadvertently helped Elon to prepare for the eventual coronavirus pandemic by helping to “identify gaps in Elon’s health infrastructure which were quickly addressed.”

Fair said the university “developed clearer lines of communication with the Alamance County Health Department, supported the importance of immunizations, and identified our own way to communicate important information to the broader community about health.”

Ginette Archinal, Elon’s medical director, echoed this sentiment.

“We were really very, very lucky that we went through the mumps in the fall, because it allowed us to really just build on protocols we already had,” Archinal said, adding that the outbreak made the threat of the coronavirus “almost anticlimactic in a way, because we knew what to do.”

While Archinal said the mumps and the coronavirus share some prevention measures such as social distancing and hand washing, the two illnesses are very different.

“Mumps we knew what we were dealing with, and we had a vaccine,” Archinal said. “With COVID-19, we didn’t know anything about the virus. There’s no vaccine, and there was really no way of knowing when it first broke out who was infected.”

Even with these differences, Archinal said the mumps outbreak provided Elon a trial run before preparing to deal with possible pandemic conditions during the global coronavirus crisis. According to Archinal, Elon was able to contain the mumps outbreak because of the school’s attentive health center, a responsive local health department, and a transparent school administration.

Archinal said local healthcare providers are generally informed of outbreaks, and said healthcare providers were warned of the mumps outbreak before the first case arrived at Elon.

“One of the nurse practitioners saw a case that ... didn’t fit conditions that we’d normally seen,” Archinal said. “Because we knew that there was mumps in the community because we pay attention to those emails from the health department, we immediately called the health department and we got testing.”

Elon’s initial mumps response included contact tracing – which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention later called a “key strategy” in preventing the spread of the coronavirus – as well as vaccine clinics beginning the week after the first case of mumps was confirmed on campus.

In total, Vice President for Student Life *Jon Dooley* sent 20 community updates about the mumps outbreak between Sept. 24, 2019, and Jan. 6, 2020.

Archinal said the culture of Elon contributed to the university’s ability to deal with the outbreak. “The whole philosophy of student life and health services of Elon is we’re there to make things better not to cover things up,” Archinal said. “And that made a huge difference with mumps.”

PAGE BY EMERY EISNER

