ALEX BENDER
22 years old | Goleta, Calif.

A college student’s uncertain future

The itching was uncontrollable. In the morning, he was brushing skin flakes off the bedsheets. He was 19, and it wasn’t how Alex Bender had imagined life as a college freshman.

After a doctor at the University of California-Santa Barbara (UCSB) health center diagnosed his psoriasis, Alex learned from his father that his grandfather had had the disease. He began using a topical medication prescribed by the doctors and hoped his skin would go back to normal once final exams were over.

Instead, his condition got worse until Alex felt that all he was doing was trying to control the itching and hiding out.

“I didn’t want to leave my house at all. I felt like I was being shunned by society. (Lesions were) starting to (move) down from my hairline onto my forehead.”

Fortunately, he was able to enroll in a clinical trial for a biologic medication that, he says, improved his life significantly. He now has no visible psoriasis.

Still, Alex worries about his future with this chronic disease. The clinical trial ends in October 2011, and he’s not sure what will happen after that. Without health insurance, he doesn’t know how he can afford the cost of another biologic drug—which can cost hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars a month.

He’s also worried about potential long-term effects. Biologic drugs work by suppressing the immune system and could increase the risk of infection or developing certain malignancies. Because psoriasis is hereditary, he worries that his children could inherit the disease.

A communications major, Alex decided to take action by forming a psoriasis support group on the UCSB campus. He hopes members will share information about treatments and provide emotional support for each other.

Alex knows that psoriasis is rarely life-threatening, but, he says, “You don’t realize how (bad it is) until you have it. It is extremely embarrassing. And there’s no cure for it. We need some funding to get psoriasis the recognition it deserves.”