



VA Research Currents

A newsletter for and about VA investigators

By John R. Feussner, MD, MPH
Chief R&D Officer

The Office of Research and Development is pleased to bring you the first issue of *VA Research Currents*. Our new newsletter will be a publication for and about our researchers and the important work they do to help ensure that VA provides our veterans with the best health care possible.

Each monthly issue of *VA Research Currents* will contain news of interest to our investigators and research administrators across the country. Contents will include summaries of major findings, descriptions of new VA R&D initiatives, updates on ongoing programs, honors received by VA researchers, and information about other matters of interest to the VA research community.

A regular feature will be columns by leaders of the four services that make up VA R&D—the Cooperative Studies Program, Medical Research Service, Health Services R&D and Rehabilita-

tion R&D. I will also use the newsletter to share information about developments that affect the overall research program.

We have seen significant change since 1996, when I began my duties as Chief Research and Development Officer. Our program is more focused than ever directly on health issues of great concern to veterans. We have launched a number of new initiatives and established collaborative relationships with other federal agencies, nonprofit organizations and private concerns.

Change is certain to continue, because we work in a dynamic research environment. *VA Research Currents* is part of our effort to make certain our researchers are aware of the changes and opportunities that environment presents. This is your newsletter, and I hope you will share your ideas about how it can serve you best. ■

Research is 'jewel in VA's crown'

By Thomas Garthwaite, MD
Under Secretary for Health

This inaugural issue of *VA Research Currents* provides a great opportunity to restate how important research is to the success of the Veterans Health Administration. Research is a critical component of our continual effort to serve the health care needs of America's veterans as effectively and efficiently as possible.

The spectrum of VA research is unique, spanning basic biomedicine, clinical trials, health services and rehabilitation. Every aspect of our research program focuses on health concerns of veterans, and we have a significant and ongoing history of research achievements that lead to better care for veterans and the nation.

Notably, the research program is an essential link between VHA and the larger scientific and medical communities. Research is a foundation of our affiliations with many of the nation's medical schools. It allows us to work closely with other federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health. It is the basis for our collaborations with organizations that share our interests, such as the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, the American Diabetes Association, the National Parkinson Foundation, and the ALS Association.

The dedication of many talented
see **GARTHWAITE** on pg. 4

VA rates high for heart attack care

Heart attack patients receive a comparable level of care in VA medical centers and non-VA hospitals, according to a study led by Laura A. Petersen, MD, MPH, of VA's Houston Center for Quality of Care and Utilization Studies and Baylor College of Medicine. She and colleagues from Harvard Medical School found that the post-heart-attack death rate among Medicare

patients at 1,530 non-VA hospitals equaled that among veteran patients at 81 VA medical centers. The researchers studied the records of nearly 2,500 VA and 30,000 Medicare patients. They reported their results in the Dec. 28 *New England Journal of Medicine*. The study was funded by VA and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, based in Rockville, Md.

Selected findings

Below is a brief selection of key findings from VA investigators in recent months. Due to space constraints, only VA investigators and affiliations are mentioned.

Watchful waiting for aneurysms—Results from VA’s eight-year Aneurysm Detection and Management (ADAM) Trial were presented by Frank Lederle, MD, Minneapolis, at an American Heart Association meeting on Nov. 15. The trial was aimed at determining when elective surgery is beneficial for patients with abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA), a leading cause of death in older men. The Society of Vascular Surgery recommends surgical repair if the dilation is 4 centimeters (cm) or greater. The study, of 1,136 men ages 50 to 79 with AAAs measuring 4 to 5.4 cm, found that operating on these relatively small aneurysms did not improve long-term survival; that delaying surgery until the aneurysm expanded to 5.5 cm did not increase the risk of death from surgery; and that ruptures were rare in this “small AAA” population.

Acupuncture for chemotherapy patients—In findings reported Dec. 6 in the *Journal of the American Medi-*

cal Association, acupuncture helped reduce vomiting among 104 cancer patients on chemotherapy more than anti-nausea drugs alone, and more than “mock” acupuncture administered as a placebo. Acupuncture reduced nausea from chemotherapy in earlier studies, but critics suspected a placebo effect. Senior author was Paul Shekelle, MD, PhD, Greater Los Angeles.

Medicare patients underserved—Steven Asch, MD, MPH, Greater LA, and colleagues showed that older Americans often fail to receive necessary medical care—and that African Americans and the poor receive fewer necessary services than other Medicare recipients. The researchers analyzed Medicare claim forms from 1994 to 1996 for more than 345,000 beneficiaries to see if they received necessary testing and treatment, including preventive care. The goal was to test a new claims-based evaluation system that avoids time-intensive reviews of medical charts. The results appeared in the Nov. 8 *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The benefits of team-managed home care—In a study of nearly 2,000 home-care patients, most of them severely disabled or terminally ill, a team led by Susan L. Hughes, DSW, formerly with VA in Hines, Ill., tested VA’s “Team-Managed Home-Based Primary Care” model against non-VA home-care at 16 sites. While death rate and physical functioning did not differ between the two groups of patients, VA patients and their caregivers overall expressed more satisfaction with their care. Terminally ill patients in the VA sample gave higher marks to their care in six of eight quality-of-life measures. Caregivers in the VA group reported less “burden,” translating into reduced

caregiver stress and burnout. The study was reported in the Dec. 13 *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Protein fragment nurtures brain cells—Frank Longo, MD, PhD, and colleagues, San Francisco, isolated a protein fragment that nurtures brain cells, offering potential hope for new therapies for Alzheimer’s disease and other degenerative brain diseases. The fragment is derived from Nerve Growth Factor, and nurtures neurons in the same way, but is a smaller molecule that can get past the brain’s filtering mechanisms. The findings were presented on Nov. 8 at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience.

Hearing aids effective—Although they have been in use for decades, three popular types of hearing aids underwent their first rigorous scientific testing in a clinical trial at eight VA medical centers, led by Vernon D. Larson, PhD, formerly with VA in Washington. The results, reported in the Oct. 11 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, showed that hearing aids substantially help users in both quiet and noisy situations.

Intense exercise equalizes gender-related differences in bone density—In a study presented Nov. 29 at a meeting of the Radiological Society of North America, Daphne J. Theodorou, MD, San Diego, and colleagues used dual X-ray absorptiometry to measure bone mineral density in 94 men and 58 women triathletes, all age 40 or older. They found that men and women’s values were equal for the lower spine and upper thighbone—common sites of serious fractures in osteoporosis.

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Recent publications and presentations

Below is a sampling of recent publications and presentations by VA investigators. Due to space constraints, only VA authors and affiliations are noted. For details on how to notify R&D Communications of upcoming publications or presentations, e-mail researchinfo@vard.org or call (410) 962-1800, ext. 223.

“Development of Robots for Rehabilitation Therapy: The Palo Alto VA/Stanford Experience.” Charles G. Bugar, MD, Peter S. Lum, PhD; H.F. Machiel Van der Loos, PhD. **Palo Alto.** (VA) *Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development*, Nov./Dec. 2000.

“Depression and Other Determinants of Stroke Patients’ Utility for Current Health State: Evidence from the VA Acute Stroke (VAST) Study.” Hayden B. Bosworth, PhD, Ronnie D. Horner, PhD, Lloyd J. Edwards, PhD, David Matchar, MD, MHS. **Durham.** *Stroke*, November 2000.

“Epinephrine Correction of Impaired Platelet Thromboxane Receptor Signaling.” Patricia C. Dunlop, PhD, Linda A. Leis, MS, Gerhard J. Johnson, MD. **Minneapolis.** *American Journal of Physiology: Cell Physiology*, Dec. 2000.

“Geographic Clustering of Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia in Patients with HIV Infection.” Robert P. Baughman, MD; A. George Smulian, MB, BCh, Peter D. Walzer, MD. **Cincinnati.** *Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*, Nov. 2000.

“Herpes Simplex Virus Type 1 ICP0 Protein Does Not Accumulate in the Nucleus of Primary Neurons in Culture.” David Fink, MD, Marina Mata,

MD. **Pittsburgh.** *Journal of Virology*, Nov. 2000.

“Policies of Disclosure on Conflicts of Interest in Biomedical Research: A National Survey.” Cheryl B. Anderson, PhD, Nelda P. Wray, MD, MPH.

Houston. *New England Journal of Medicine*, Nov. 2000.

“In Vivo Depletion of T Lymphocytes Subsets from NFS/N Mice Infected with CAS-BR-E Murine Leukemia Virus.” Deanna S. Robbins, PhD. **Baltimore.** International Workshop on Retrovirus Pathogenesis, Nov. 2000.

“A Multicomponent Intervention to Prevent Major Bleeding Complications in Older Patients Receiving Warfarin.” Rebecca J. Beyth, MD, Linda Quinn, MS, C. Seth Landefeld, MD. **Houston.** *Annals of Internal Medicine*, Nov. 2000.

“The Role of Stored Iron in Atherosclerosis.” Paula S. Howes, MS, RN, Leo R. Zacharski, MD, Jerome Sullivan, MD, PhD, Bruce Chow, MS. **White River Junction, Vt.** *Journal of Vascular Nursing*, Dec. 2000.

Policy update

New HSR&D funding guidelines—Effective immediately, proposals submitted to HSR&D’s Investigator-Initiated Research (IIR) program may request up to five years of funding and are no longer subject to a pre-set funding limit. According to HSR&D program manager Claire Maklan, “This change, which brings HSR&D in line with R-01 projects funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, gives VA investigators added flexibility but also emphasizes their responsibility to design projects efficiently and ensure that budget requests are very well justified.”

Funding opportunities

Lasker Awards—The Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation is accepting nominations through Feb. 1 for its 2001 awards in Basic Medical Research; Clinical Medical Research; Special Achievement in Medical Science; and Public Service in Support of Medical Research and the Health Sciences. Details are available at www.laskerfoundation.org or from VA’s Dot Brady at (202) 273-8873.

Rehabilitation R&D solicitations—RR&D is accepting proposals to establish new centers in a variety of research areas. Proposals are due on March 6. RR&D, in collaboration with the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association, has also announced new funding opportunities in spinal-cord research. Proposals must be received by March 15. For more details on these opportunities visit the RR&D website at www.vard.org/opps/dev.htm or call Laura Bowman at (202) 408-3680.

Cooperative Studies Program solicitations—The Cooperative Studies Program (CSP) has announced solicitations for Letters of Intent in the following research areas: Aging, Gulf War Illness, PTSD and Tri-National (VA/United States, United Kingdom and Canada) clinical trials focused on treatments for common chronic diseases prevalent in the three countries. For instructions on submitting a CSP Planning Request (Letter of Intent) and more details contact Joe Gough at (202) 273-8248 or joe.gough@mail.va.gov.

Feedback on
Research Currents?
Send e-mail to
researchinfo@vard.org

GARTHWAITE (cont. from pg. 1)

scientists and prudent direction by the Office of Research and Development have combined to make research a jewel in VA's crown. The search for new knowledge that redefines excellence in health care is an indispensable part of the VHA mission.

We will continue to take great pride in our research accomplishments, but we will also keep in mind that the greatest value of our research findings lies in translating them into better care for our veteran patients. That will remain our true measure of research success, and I am confident we will continue to meet the challenge for years to come. ■

To receive an electronic version of this newsletter, send a note with your e-mail address to researchinfo@vard.org

Newsmakers

Lucille B. Beck, PhD, director of VA's Audiology and Speech Pathology Service and past president of the American Academy of Audiology, received a 2000 Presidential Rank Award for Meritorious Executive Service.

Bruce Sangeorzan, MD, director of the Rehab R&D Center for Limb Loss and Prosthetic Engineering, Puget Sound, will receive an Orthopaedic Research and Education Foundation (OREF) Clinical Research Award from the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons on Feb. 28 at the group's annual meeting in San Francisco. The award recognizes Dr. Sangeorzan's past research on changes in the talo-calcaneal joint in pathological conditions of the hindfoot.

Margot S. Damaser, PhD, Hines, and **Eric J. Huang**, MD, PhD, San Francisco, were among 59 federal scientists and engineers to receive Presidential Early Career Awards at the White House on Oct. 24. Dr.

Damasar received the award for "outstanding research on the human urinary bladder using mathematical modeling along with physiological and neurological studies." Dr. Huang was recognized for "creative research investigating Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease by studying factors involved in the survival of neurons." They will each receive \$125,000 over five years from VA's Office of Research and Development.

Upcoming events

Jan. 24 – 26: VA conference on Gulf War Illness research, Alexandria, Va. Info: Wendy Smith, SAIC Conference Services, smithgw@saic.com.

Feb. 14 – 16: HSR&D annual meeting, Washington, D.C. Info: www.va.gov/hsrd2001.

April 8 – 14: National VA Research Week. Watch *Research Currents* for more details.

April 12 – 13: Rehab R&D national meeting, Crystal City, Va. Info: Bob Potts, (202) 408-3681.

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