VAPHS Research Portfolio

Active Research Projects

343 Total Projects
142 Active Investigators

281 Human Subjects
44 Animal Subjects
18 Basic Science

VAPHS Research at a Glance

$33,459,179 Total Research Expenditures for FY 2012

$11,023,052 Veterans Affairs
$19,826,848 National Institutes of Health
$1,793,466 Research Foundation
$815,813 Other

6 New VA Funded Research Projects for FY 2012
50 VA Projects Submitted for Funding for FY 2012

9 Biomedical Laboratory Research and Development
2 Clinical Science Research and Development
6 Health Services Research and Development
33 Rehabilitation Research and Development

2012 Research Publications


In 2012, the Human Engineering Research Laboratories continued its mission to improve the movement and function of Veterans with Disabilities with the following projects:

- The Transfer Assessment Instrument is a 27-item scale that enables clinicians to quickly determine if their patients are performing transfers in accordance with best practices. It quantifies transfer technique in detail and does not discriminate based on subject characteristics such as upper limb strength, trunk balance, disability type, and amount of transfer experience. The scale items are based on HERL's previous transfer research as well as biomechanical and ergonomic principles that minimize joint loading. The instrument is currently in its third iteration and is being tested with success in clinics around the world.

- The results of a survey of wheelchair users have indicated that breakdowns are occurring at a large and increasing rate. HERL staff are working to reduce wheelchair breakdowns in part by creating training materials listing simple wheelchair maintenance steps that will be available online. We are also creating more specialized online training courses for clinicians.

- HERL continues its collaboration with the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in disseminating the latest assistive technology medical and research information in the State of the Science symposium series. The Center has also partnered with the United States Marine Corps' Wounded Warrior Regiment with our Fabrication and Assistive Technology program, which teaches the basics of machining to recovering Marines.
CHERP continues to advance the quality and equity of health and health care for vulnerable Veteran populations through rigorous health services research, partnerships with VA operations and policy stakeholders, research training and mentoring, and service. This year, in preparation for the transition from a Health Services Research and Development (HSR&D) Center of Excellence to a Center of Innovation (COIN), CHERP refined its organizational structure and expanded collaborations to support achievement of the COIN program goals and its strategic goals. As an example, CHERP reconstituted their Steering Committee to ensure representation by key VA partners engaged in research with CHERP investigators and recruited Dr. Matthew Chinman to co-direct its Dissemination, Implementation, and Evaluation Core and expand its capacity for implementation science.

Also this year, CHERP advanced its cross-Center research program in partnership with the Office of Analytics and Business Informatics (OABI), the Center for Minority Veterans, the Office of Health Equity, the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, and VISN4 leaders aimed at improving health care experiences and patient satisfaction with VA health care among racial and ethnic minorities. As an example, in collaboration with OABI on analyses of VA patient satisfaction data, CHERP investigators developed new analytical approaches that provided OABI with a deeper understanding of facility and patient-level factors that drive racial and ethnic differences in satisfaction with VA health care. OABI has implemented a number of these new analytical approaches into their national reporting systems for VA satisfaction data.


The Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) serves as a resource to all medical centers in VISN 4, and to the network of medical centers at the national level, on issues related to the treatment and prevention of comorbid medical, mental health and/or substance-use disorders. MIRECC’s goal is to improve the mental and physical health, quality of life and outcomes of health care services for Veterans with mental illness. MIRECC researchers achieved significant accomplishments in 2012 including:

- MIRECC faculty Robert A. Sweet, MD and David W. Oslin, MD were the guest editors for the American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry: America’s Aged and Aging Veterans. http://journals.lww.com/ajgponline/toc/2012/03000 (March 2012, Volume 20, Issue 3)
- Adam Bramoweth, PhD, MIRECC Postdoctoral Fellow, received a MIRECC Pilot Award for his project, Clinical Characterization of Insomnia: a Retrospective and [Historical] Prospective Cohort Study.
- Recruitment for MIRECC’s Behavioral Health Research Registry reached 919.
- John Kasckow, MD, received funding from the VA Cooperative Studies Program for VA Augmentation and Switching Treatments for Improving Depression Outcomes (CSP 556).
- Matt Chinman, PhD, was appointed Chair of the newly developed Peer Support Subgroup of the Mental Health Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) Recovery Workgroup.
- The MIRECC is partnering with the VAPHS Advanced Fellowship in Women’s Health, directed by Melissa McNeil, MD, to create a PhD clinical psychologist research track, directed by Gretchen L. Haas, PhD.


One of the key missions of the Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center’s (GRECC) is to advance scientific knowledge regarding such needs and the methods of meeting those needs by facilitating a higher quality of geriatric care through:

- geriatric and gerontological research
- training of health personnel in the provision of health care to older individuals
- development and evaluation of improved models of clinical service for older Veterans.

GRECC research focuses on areas such as:

- neuronal cell death in stroke and neurodegenerative diseases
- hearing, communication disorders, and aphasia rehabilitation in stroke and aging
- mobility in the elderly
- polypharmacy
- pain assessment and treatment in the elderly
- barriers to delivery of care to the elderly
- stroke-related quality of life measures
- avoiding inappropriate prescribing and medication errors in long term care

Research Accomplishments:

- Number of Peer Reviewed Publications: 85
- Number of Extramurally Funded Research Projects: 44
- Total Research Expenditures Reported in RDIS: $7,568,293
- Estimated VERA Research Funding for VAPHS generated by FY2012 research expenditures: $3,062,500
- Merit Review Boards: 10 GRECC faculty served on 25 study sections/grant review committees
- Editorial Review Boards: 10 GRECC faculty served on 32 editorial review boards

The VAPHS Clinical Trials Center (CTC) was established in 2007. The CTC, which is supported by the Veterans Research Foundation of Pittsburgh, provides services such as study coordination and regulatory support to clinician interested in conducting research. In 2012, approximately 20 investigators were part of the CTC. A total of 17 studies were actively enrolling during the year, while another 15 were providing follow up to subjects with 51 patients volunteering to participate. In 2012, approximately 70% of CTC participants were enrolled in studies evaluating investigational drugs.
Dr. Michael Boninger

In October 2012, Michael Boninger, M.D., Medical Director of the Human Engineering Research Laboratories was elected into the prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM). Dr. Boninger's research efforts at both the VA and the University of Pittsburgh focus on technologies to improve the lives of individuals with spinal cord injury and other disabilities. His work has led to the development of patents for wheelchair devices throughout the world. In addition to these research activities, Dr. Boninger is a teacher and mentor to many junior investigators.

Dr. Boninger was selected by current IOM members through a rigorous process. Election requires a commitment to volunteer on boards and in other activities carried out by IOM in its role as an independent, science-based advisor on health issues. The IOM was established in 1970 as the health branch of the National Academy of Sciences.

Dr. Peter L. Strick

In May 2012, in recognition of his scientific contributions and accomplishments, Dr. Peter L. Strick was elected to membership in the prestigious U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The NAS was established by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 to provide independent advice to the government on matters related to science and technology. Election to the Academy is considered one of the highest honors that can be accorded a U.S. scientist or engineer.

Dr. Strick, a senior VA research career scientist, is director of the Systems Neuroscience Institute, co-director of the Center for the Neural Basis of Cognition, a joint program between the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University. Dr. Strick's research investigates the neural circuits that are responsible for the control of voluntary movement, cognition and affect. He developed the use of viruses with an affinity for neurons as a new technique for unraveling connections in the central nervous system. According to the NAS, Dr. Strick is among the 84 new members and 21 foreign associates from 15 countries who were recognized this year for “their distinguished and continuing achievements in original research.”
VAPHS Research Administration

Steven. H. Graham, MD, PhD, Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development
Stuart R. Steinhauer, PhD, Acting Deputy Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development
Nicholas Squeglia, Administrative Officer/Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development

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Administrative Staff
Patricia Simms
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Committee Chairpersons
Gretchen Haas, PhD, Chairperson, VAPHS Research and Development Committee
Bruce Ling, MD, MPH, Chairperson, VAPHS Institutional Review Board 1
George Dougherty, MD, Chairperson, VAPHS Institutional Review Board 2
Robert Sweet, MD, Chairperson, VAPHS Institutional Biosafety Committee (outgoing)
Jie Fan, MD, Chairperson, VAPHS Institutional Biosafety Committee (incoming)
Amanda Smith, PhD, Chairperson, VAPHS Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee
Debra K. Weiner, MD, Chairperson, VAPHS Research Scientific Evaluation Committee