



Abstracts from the

**Office of Research on
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Introduction

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THE CONCEPTS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH and career development programs in women's health had been of interest to the Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH) for a number of years before such programs were initiated. Early on, the ORWH became a partner with the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in developing the concept of Women's Reproductive Health Research (WRHR) Career Development Centers. The goals of that NICHD program are (1) to promote research on women's reproductive health and transfer findings that will benefit the health of women and (2) to bridge clinical training with independent research, increasing investigators in obstetrics and gynecology through a mentored research experience, leading to an independent scientific career addressing women's reproductive health issues.

The concept and initiatives of the WRHR in developing young researchers in a field central to women's health were impressive, and ORWH began to envision a similar career development effort that would represent a collaborative effort across many disciplines, including but going beyond obstetrics and gynecology to other medical specialties and other health professions, as well as other scientific disciplines, such as the social and behavioral sciences, biotechnology, anthropology, chemistry, physics, genetics, and so on. For many years, the modern women's health movement has called for less fragmentation of

health care for women. Developing a cadre of researchers with experience in integrated and strongly mentored interdisciplinary efforts seemed appropriate in providing a research stimulus to comprehensive, interdisciplinary health care for women. With this in mind, we considered establishing a career development program that might encourage interdisciplinary research as a foundation for integrated care, provide support for development of interdisciplinary collaborations, and enhance our knowledge of women's health gaps in knowledge as well as sex/gender factors in health and diseases. These programmatic goals led to the development of the current interdisciplinary research and career development programs of the ORWH. The desire was to create the opportunity for the synergy of interdisciplinary wisdom and research efforts to propel progress in women's health research while also expanding the numbers of scientists who were involved in, and appreciated, such an approach to women's health research and perhaps, ultimately, women's health care.

The development of this program kept in mind certain major themes for NIH women's health research and career development programs: an interdisciplinary approach; designing research to allow an understanding of sex and gender factors; addressing health disparities; understanding biological processes, prevention, behavior, and their contributions to women's health across their life span; and mentoring. Those themes

were incorporated as priorities into the design of the Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH) program.

A major issue was how to administer this program, as ORWH, located in the Office of the Director of NIH, does not have direct funding authority. A meeting was held with Dr. Duane Alexander, director of NICHD, and Dr. Yvonne Maddox, deputy director, with a plea for that institute to facilitate such a program. Fortunately, they responded enthusiastically, and because of their support, BIRCWH, the first interdisciplinary program of the ORWH, became a reality. The BIRCWH centers are funded by ORWH but with cofunding and scientific oversight by 12 individual NIH institutes and centers and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. There have been three funding cycles of BIRCWHs: 12 BIRCWH I centers over 2000–2004; 12 additional BIRCWH II centers over 2002–2006, and 11 new or continuing BIRCWH III centers funded in 2005–2009.

The BIRCWH program has three fundamental concepts: interdisciplinary research, strong mentoring, and career development. There is emphasis on mentoring, which the scholars experience by working with established scientists who have diverse and broad expertise. The subject areas under research in the centers are wide-ranging: mental health, diabetes, cardiovascular health, neurological disorders, trauma, health disparities research, reproductive health, menopausal hormone therapy, sex/gender research, substance abuse, cancer, molecular biology/genetics, health services research, and arthritis/musculoskeletal health.

Once the BIRCWH career development program was under way, the next step was to design a program that would encourage established researchers to focus on sex and gender factors in health and disease, and the concept of Specialized Centers of Research on Sex and Gender Factors Affecting Women's Health (SCORs) was selected as the most desirable mechanism to accomplish centers of interdisciplinary research. Dr. Steven Katz, director of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, graciously agreed to have NIAMS administer the program and to help us develop the concept. A SCOR was envisioned as a national resource associated with one or more major medical complexes and dedicated to furthering the research

effort on women's health or sex/gender factors to address research from basic studies to clinical application. As such, a SCOR is expected to include a theme for an overall research program for a disease that addresses a critical area of opportunity to advance knowledge and patient care; an interdisciplinary team of basic and clinical researchers to provide a mutually supportive interaction in meeting the research objectives; and both basic and clinical research projects that develop new approaches, significant hypotheses, and improved strategies. Currently, there are 11 SCORs supported by the ORWH and cofunded by six NIH institutes and the Food and Drug Administration.

The future holds much promise. We now have 6 years of experience in addressing women's health research through interdisciplinary approaches. Many of the research results now becoming available will lead us forward to interventions that will improve the health of women and men. The ORWH intends to reissue and support a BIRCWH IV program and a SCOR II program during 2006 to be funded in 2007. The participation of the talented scholars and researchers in these programs is taking us forward with excitement and the promise of clinically relevant research results. Young investigators, as BIRCWH scholars, are demonstrating promise and success in their research careers.

Beginning in 2004, the ORWH has held a yearly Women's Health Interdisciplinary Research Symposium, during which BIRCWH scholars and SCOR investigators present the results or preliminary findings of their work. The abstracts from the 2nd Interdisciplinary Research Symposium are included in this issue of the *Journal of Women's Health*. They demonstrate examples of the breadth and magnitude of progress in interdisciplinary approaches to women's health and sex/gender research accomplished through these two programs.

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