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*VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System's Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center
Summer 2008*

NEW GRECC CLINICAL DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Program For Intensive Residential Aphasia Treatment and Education (PIRATE)

Aphasia is a disorder resulting from brain damage, most often due to left-hemisphere stroke, that causes communication impairments ranging from mild word-finding difficulty to complete inability to speak, understand, read, or write, while intellectual abilities in other areas are relatively unaffected. The number of veterans currently living with aphasia can be conservatively estimated at nearly 80,000, and several thousand of the approximately 12,000 veterans admitted to VHA facilities for stroke each year can be expected to have aphasia. Although current evidence indicates that individuals with aphasia make greater functional gains in communication as a result of intensive speech-language therapy, recent trends have shifted aphasia rehabilitation services to short-term therapy in outpatient settings often accompanied by seri-



ous treatment access issues. PIRATE is an advanced clinical access delivery model that eliminates barriers preventing community-dwelling veterans with aphasia from accessing speech and language rehabilitation services. Beginning in Fall 2008, participants will reside in the

new residential villas at the VAPHS Heinz Division for the duration of a 17-day program of individually-tailored therapy sessions for 6-hours each day. PIRATE will be evaluated via two performance-based assessments, a caregiver-reported assessment, and a patient-reported assessment. Dr. Patrick Doyle, GRECC Associate Director for Research and Chief, VAPHS Audiology and Speech Pathology Service, says "By 2012, community-dwelling veterans with aphasia will have access to residential aphasia treatment programs nationwide within VHA."

Geriatric Driving Safety Clinic



Addressing driving issues in elderly veterans with cognitive decline is an important public safety issue, and for various reasons primary care providers are often uncomfortable dealing with this subject even though Pennsylvania law requires physicians to report unsafe drivers to the state's Driver Licensing Bureau. Consequently, Dr. Michelle Rossi, GRECC Associate Director for Clinical Care, developed the concept of a multidisciplinary Geriatric Driving Safety Clinic as an expansion of driving safety assessments currently conducted as a small part of the comprehensive geriatric assessment in the Geriatric Evaluation and Management (GEM) Clinic. Candidates for evaluation will be older veterans who potentially have cognitive problems, and who have been referred by their PCPs. Assessments will be conducted by a multidisciplinary team composed of a physician, (cont. on page 6)

VAPHS 2008 Excellence in Research



Rajiv Jain, MD, Ali Sonel, MD, Anne Van Cott, MD, Steven H. Graham, MD, Ph.D., Terry Gerigk-Wolf, Congressman Jason Altmire

Steven H. Graham, MD, Ph.D. was awarded the VAPHS 2008 Excellence in Research Award. Dr. Graham was selected by the R&D Committee from 6 nominees. The award was presented at the VAPHS Research Day; and the following summary of Dr. Graham's accomplishments was presented: Dr. Graham has consistently made outstanding contributions to research as an academic physician-scientist at VAPHS. Dr. Graham is the Director of the Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) at VAPHS, a position he has held since 2004. He has ultimate responsibility over the research, teaching and clinical activities of the GRECC. In this role, he has promoted an outstanding program.

Dr. Graham has over 110 peer-reviewed publications. His scientific interests and expertise are in the response of brain to injury, either from stroke or trauma. He has expertise in the role of cyclooxygenase-2 (COX2) in the brain response to ischemia and trauma. His research explores methods of neuroprotection by modulating COX2 expression and apoptotic pathways.

Dr. Graham has been continuously funded by VA merit review awards since 1992. Prior to this, he initiated his VA research career with a 3-year VA career development award. Furthermore, his basic research has been continuously funded by the NIH since 1996.

From 2002-2006, Dr. Graham held the post of Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development at

VAPHS. During this critical period he guided the research program, including basic science and clinical studies, over a broad range of disciplines. He implemented multiple programs to enhance and streamline required regulatory oversight of all research programs at VAPHS.

In addition to his own scientific contributions, Dr. Graham has been instrumental in the career development of many junior faculty. Since 1990, he has supervised nine postdoctoral fellows. He currently serves as the VA Research Career Development sponsor for Miguel Estevez, MD, PhD whose work focuses on molecular signaling pathways in several neurological conditions using the *C. elegans* worm model. Dr. Graham is a member of the graduate student training faculty within the Center for Neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

In summary, Dr. Graham was recommended for the 2008 Excellence in Research Award at VAPHS because of the many levels at which he has contributed to research excellence at VAPHS. His own research provides significant contributions to the understanding of the pathways that lead to brain injury due to ischemia and trauma and means to ameliorate damage. He has a primary leadership role in the GRECC currently and had a leadership role as the Associate Chief of Staff for Research and Development in the recent past. In both of these positions he has had and continues to have a significant impact on the research mission at VAPHS. Through mentoring he has promoted the research careers of multiple trainees, including playing a significant role in the research career development of a VA Research Career Development awardee.

Who's new in the GRECC?



Michael Dickey, Ph.D.

Dr. Michael Dickey joined the GRECC in 2007 from Northwestern University. Dr. Dickey studies language processing in adults and its impairment following brain injury. He also works on brain rehabilitation among stroke survi-

vors, using insights from linguistic and psycholinguistic theory to design new rehabilitation methods. Dr. Dickey's specific research interests include: (a) automatic processing of sentences among stroke survivors; (b) the neural under-

pinnings of normal and impaired language processing; and (c) development and testing of novel language assessment and rehabilitation tools.

Dawn Fuhrer, B.A.

Dawn Fuhrer joined the GRECC in 2007 as Administrative Officer. Mrs. Fuhrer was previously an employee of the VAPHS Research Office. Mrs. Fuhrer served in an administrative role as the Research & Development Committee Coordi-

nator and was additionally responsible for grant submissions, personnel issues and ensuring that all VAPHS research staff were properly credentialed and trained in order to perform research at the VAPHS.



Keri Rodriguez, Ph.D.

Dr. Keri L. Rodriguez is a Research Health Scientist and core investigator at both the GRECC and the VAPHS CHERP. Dr. Rodriguez works at the interface of medicine, sociology, palliative care, and linguistics. She obtained her PhD in Medical Sociology in 2003 and continued her training

as a VA Fellow in Health Services Research. She has worked on projects in communication in advanced cancer, chronic heart failure, end-of-life care, inappropriate prescribing, and intensive-care unit family support. Currently, her focus is on health and health

care equity, patient-provider communication, and end-of-life care. She is also Research Assistant Professor of Medicine in the Division of General Internal Medicine and Affiliate Faculty in the Sociology Dept. at the Univ. of Pittsburgh.

Debra K. Weiner, M.D.

Dr. Debra K. Weiner, is a rheumatologist, geriatrician and acupuncturist who focuses her clinical, educational and research efforts on pain and aging. She has been continuously funded by the NIH over the past decade and is recognized as an expert in her field. She has published numerous peer-reviewed papers and three books related to pain and aging and is section chief of Pain & Aging in Pain Medicine, the official journal of

the American Academy of Pain Medicine. Her current research focuses on clinical trials designed to test the efficacy of acupuncture and related modalities for the treatment of chronic musculoskeletal disorders; understanding the relationship between pain, physical performance and neuropsychological performance; and improving evaluation and management strategies for older adults with chronic low back



Who's new in the GRECC? Continued...



Guodong Cao, Ph.D.

Dr. Guodong Cao joined the GRECC in 2008. Dr. Cao's research focuses on the molecular mechanisms of neuronal cell death associated with cerebral ischemia as well as the development of novel therapeutic reagents to prevent the ischemic brain injury. Dr. Cao has developed several therapeutic proteins, which are potent neuroprotectants against

ischemic injuries. One of them may be potentially applied in clinic for the treatment of stroke. Dr. Cao has published numerous peer-reviewed papers; several of them are among the list of the most cited in the journal. Dr. Cao is also Research Assistant Professor in Department of Neurology at the University of Pittsburgh.

GRECC Friday Noon Conference Series

The 2007-2008 GRECC Friday Conference Series at the University Drive Division presented 27 lectures on recent advances in research, education, and clinical practice in geriatrics. Speakers represented VA facilities, a variety of university schools and departments, and non-profit health care organizations. This is one of the major GRECC continuing education activities for VAPHS staff; one hour of CME/CEU credit is provided for each lecture, and VA employees whose disciplines do not require continuing education credits for maintaining certification can apply these weekly programs towards their annual 40 hours mandatory training requirement.

A new feature of the GRECC Noon Conferences is the remote delivery of the programs to other sites via the VA's Live Meeting web conferencing system. The speakers' PowerPoint slides and audio portion of their presentation are delivered to conference rooms at the Highland Drive and Heinz Divisions as well as to a limited number of VAPHS employees in their offices. During the next year we expect to add other VISN 4 facilities to this distance learning alternative to driving to University Drive.

The 2008-2009 series will begin September 5, 2008. We are glad to receive suggestions for potential speakers or topics for future lectures. Please contact the GRECC office if you would like to be added to the e-mail list to receive announcements of upcoming Noon Conferences and other GRECC education offerings.

GRECC Advisory Committee

C. Bernie Good, MD, MPH, FACP has recently been appointed Chairperson of the GRECC Advisory Committee. Dr. Good is Section Chief, General Internal Medicine, VAPHS, and Associate Professor of Medicine and Pharmacy, University of Pittsburgh. He is also a core faculty member for the VAPHS Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion. Dr. Good's research specialties include pharmacy benefits, medication safety, and racial disparities in health care. Other members of the GRECC Advisory Committee are:

Robert Arnold, MD	Jane Cauley, DrPH	Anne Newman, MD
Carolyn Bechtold, RN, MSN	Steven DeKosky, MD	Neil Resnick, MD
Timothy Burke, MD	Rajiv Jain, MD	Richard Schulz, PhD
Judy Cameron, PhD	Malcolm McNeil, PhD	Steven Shapiro, MD
	Terry Gerigk Wolf, FACHE	

GRECC Newsletter

Publisher

Steven H. Graham, MD, PhD
GRECC Director
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare Center
Pittsburgh, PA

Executive Editor

John Hennon, EdD
Associate Director/Education
GRECC

Managing Editor

Graphic Designer

Dawn Fuhrer
Administrative Officer GRECC

Editorial Board

Patrick Doyle, PhD
Associate Director/Research
GRECC

Steven H. Graham, MD, PhD
GRECC Director

John Hennon, EdD
Associate Director/Education
GRECC

Michelle Rossi, MD, MPH
Associate Director/Clinical Care
GRECC

Phone: 412-365-5756

Fax: 412-365-5768

Article submissions, e-mail:
dawn.fuhrer@va.gov

GRECC PALLIATIVE CARE NEWS

Significant Findings From an Ongoing Clinical Demonstration Project- the Geriatric Palliative Care Unit



Dr. Emily Jaffe, GRECC Staff Physician and Medical Director of the VAPHS Geriatric Palliative Care Unit (GPCU), presented recent findings from this clinical demonstration project at the Spring, 2008 GRECC Advisory Committee meeting.

Data was collected during the past year in order to evaluate and demonstrate the efficacy of the GPCU, including studies of medication appropriateness, suboptimal prescribing, and unnecessary drug use among GPCU patients; an assessment of outcomes of GPCU patients with

advance directives compared with other VAPHS nursing home and hospice units; and an after death bereavement survey of GPCU patient families. Among the significant findings of these studies are that Geriatric Palliative Care decreased transfers to acute care, that less days are spent in acute care by patients transferred to acute care from the GPCU compared to other units, and there is decreased non-necessary medication use by GPCU patients from time of admission to time of death. All these findings can be translated into substantial cost savings for VAPHS as a result of the GPCU. Also, it was found that family satisfaction with the care received by GPCU patients was substantially greater than satisfaction with care by other VAPHS units on 12 of 13 measures, and equal to other units on the 13th measure.

PALLIATIVE CARE EDUCATION PROGRAM

The GRECC is offering an 8-week Palliative Care Education Program at the VAPHS Heinz Division this summer. Each session will be on Fridays from 2:00pm – 3:00pm. The program was developed primarily to meet the education needs of nurses at the Heinz Division, but providers from other disciplines and other sites will also benefit from attending.

The content is based on curriculum modules developed by the VA Palliative Care Network and has been modified by GRECC faculty to ensure that the program addresses the learning needs of nurses at all levels, that appropriate geriatric content is included, and that the content is relevant to long term care patients. The schedule, topics, and room locations are as follows:

June 20	Overview of Palliative Care	Mason's Pavilion
June 27	Transition to Death	Director's Conference Room
July 11	How to Assess and Palliate Dyspnea	Recreation Hall
July 18	Prognostication	Director's Conference Room
July 25	Communication: Breaking Bad News	Director's Conference Room
August 1	Home Hospice: Home Care of the Dying Patient	Director's Conference Room
August 8	Pain Control	Recreation Hall
August 15	Bereavement	Director's Conference Room

No advance registration is necessary

One hour of CME/CEU credit will be provided for each session

GRECC-MIRECC Collaboration

The GRECC and the VISN 4 MIRECC (Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center) have begun a collaborative effort to improve behavioral health services for older veterans. Use of mental health services by veterans is greater than for the American population as a whole, and the most rapid growth in demand in the past 10-15 years has been among the oldest veterans.

Among the challenges for VHA is to provide access to behavioral health services by the large number of elderly veterans who reside in rural and medically underserved areas – this is an especially prevalent situation in much of VISN 4, particularly in most parts of Pennsylvania and in West Virginia. The GRECC and MIRECC have responded to the challenge by designing a series of educational interventions targeting VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in VISN 4. The initial objective is to offer education and training on evidence-based interventions for treatment of depression among late-life patients seen in CBOCs; the longer-range objective is to determine if patient mental health status improves as a result of this initiative.

The project was initiated during a full-day training session on May 16, 2008 on Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT), a widely-used evidence-based intervention for depression that has demonstrated benefits for elderly individuals. The upcoming VHA Uniform Mental Health Services Handbook specifies that all veterans with depression, anxiety disorders, and other conditions must be provided evidence-based psychotherapy by all VA Medical Centers and CBOCs, and IPT is one of the evidence-based treatments included in the guidelines. Thirty-three staff – mostly frontline behavioral health services providers – from western Pennsylvania CBOCs and VAPHS attended this session. Participants were offered follow-up training through telephone case conferences to discuss use of evidence-based treatments with actual patients.

Planning has also begun for another similar project in 2009 that will emphasize use of Problem Solving Therapy (PST), another evidence-based intervention for treating elderly depression. Funding to support the GRECC-MIRECC collaboration has been provided by the Geriatric Education Center of Pennsylvania.

GRECC Trainees



The GRECC mission includes training our nation's future health care workforce. During academic year 2007-2008, the GRECC offered interdisciplinary clinical and didactic educational experiences to 30 trainees representing the following disciplines: geriatric medicine, geriatric psychiatry, psychology, pharmacy, audiology/speech pathology, social work, physician assistant, occupational therapy, clinical pastoral. Trainees rotated full-time through

several geriatric-specific clinics and in some cases discipline-specific clinics at one of the three VAPHS campuses for periods ranging from six weeks to one year. In addition to these VA-funded training positions, GRECC staff physicians also precepted over 40 internal medicine residents in their clinics for short-term rotations.

Driving Safety Clinic (cont.)

nurse practitioner, psychologist, occupational therapist, and social worker. Team findings and recommendations will be presented to the veteran and family members, and appropriate follow-up will be scheduled through the veteran's PCP. Initial evaluation of the Clinic will be through: 1) comparison of the current frequency of mandated PCP reporting of unsafe drivers with the successful identification of veterans with driving safety issues by the Clinic; 2) PCP satisfaction with the Clinic's service; 3) determination of effectiveness in decreasing driving in veterans with dementia; and 4) survey of families of veterans to determine their insights and observations of veterans' driving safety.

GRECC VA Investigator Initiated Research

VA RR&D Merit Review Project “Assessing Visual and Auditory Language Processing Modalities in Aphasia” Malcom McNeil, PhD
 VA RR&D Research Career Scientist, Malcolm McNeil, PhD
 VA RR&D Merit Review Project “Biofeedback Treatment of Apraxia of Speech Following Stroke” Malcolm McNeil, PhD
 VA RR&D Merit Review Project “Communicative Functioning in Neurogenic Speech-Language Disorders II” Patrick Doyle, PhD
 VA RR&D Merit Review Project “The Impact of Hearing Loss on Intra and Cross-Modal Context Effects” Sheila Pratt, PhD
 VA BLR&D Merit Review Project “FAS Mediated Cell Death in Cerebral Ischemia” Steven H. Graham, MD, PhD
 VA BLR&D Merit Review Project “Gene Therapy for Cachexia” Paula Clemens, MD
 VA BLR&D Merit Review Project “Heat Shock Proteins and Neuroprotection in Cerebral Ischemia” Jun Chen, MD
 VA RR&D Career Development Project “Attention and Lexical Access in Aphasia and Apraxia of Speech” William Hula, Ph.D.

Selected GRECC Publications

Neuronal cyclooxygenase-2 activity and prostaglandins PGE2, PGD2, and PGF2 alpha exacerbate hypoxic neuronal injury in neuron-enriched primary culture.

Li W, Wu S, Hickey RM, Rose ME, **Chen J, Graham SH.**

Neurochem Res. 2008 Mar;33(3):490-9.

Polypharmacy and health beliefs in older outpatients.

Rossi MI, Young A, Maher R, **Rodriguez KL**, Appelt CJ, Perera S, Hajjar ER, **Hanlon JT.**

Am J Geriatr Pharmacother. 2007 Dec;5(4):317-23.

The Burden of Stroke Scale (BOSS) provided valid, reliable, and responsive score estimates of functioning and well-being during the first year of recovery from stroke.

Doyle PJ, McNeil MR, Bost JE, Ross KB, Wambaugh JL, Hula WD, Mikoloc JM.

Qual Life Res. 2007 Oct;16(8):1389-98.

Auditory performance characteristics of the Computerized Revised Token Test (CRTT).

Eberwein CA, **Pratt SR, McNeil MR**, Fossett TR, Szuminsky NJ, **Doyle PJ.**

J Speech Lang Hear Res. 2007 Aug;50(4):865-77.

Consensus list of signals to detect potential adverse drug reactions in nursing homes.

Handler SM, **Hanlon JT**, Perera S, Roumani YF, Nace DA, Fridsma DB, Saul MI, Castle NG, **Studenski SA.**

J Am Geriatr Soc. 2008 May;56(5):808-15.

Judgment of functional morphology in agrammatic aphasia

Dickey MW, Milman LH, Thompson CK.

J Neurolinguistics. 2008 Jan;21(1):35-65.

Patients with Complex Chronic Diseases: perspectives on supporting self-management.

Sevick MA, Traugh JM, Ling BS, Anderson RT, Piatt GA, Kilbourne AM, Goodman RM.

J Gen Intern Med. 2007 Dec;22 Suppl 3:438-44.

