

USU Building a Health
Science Community of
Compassion & Hope

by Gina Pattison



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The Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences enjoys a worldwide reputation as a military and public health education and research center of excellence. USU is known for its outstanding graduates, who work as scientists and health care practitioners. They come to Bethesda, Md., to study and prepare for careers in service to the nation. They leave committed to serve those in harm's way.

The university's programs are unique. The F. Edward Hebert School of Medicine curriculum contains all content required to maintain status as a medical school accredited by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, while adding an additional 500 hours of military-unique content. The extra coursework focuses on force health protection, tropical diseases, disaster medicine, military and public health medical readiness, and adaptation to extreme environments.

A comprehensive understanding of operations and military communities is also key to the success of a uniformed physician. From the day students matriculate to the medical school, their role as partners in their medical education is paramount.

USU offers students an extraordinary learning experience that blends science, courage and commitment to service. Yet, there is another way

in which USU is distinct. As Rear Adm. (select) Clinton F. Faison III, commanding officer of Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton and a USU alumnus says: "USU teaches its students there is more to medicine than just science. At USU, they instill in students a belief that the practice of medicine and what they as physicians offer patients consists of three things: science, compassion and hope."

Faison received his medical degree from USU in 1984. Since then, he has built an impressive career in medicine, completing both post-graduate training in General Pediatrics at Naval Medical Center San Diego and fellowship training in Neurodevelopmental Pediatrics at the University of Washington. While Faison enjoys being a physician, his USU training taught him to look beyond clinical practice.

As commanding officer of the U.S. Expeditionary Medical Facility Kuwait from April 2006 until May 2007, Faison led a Level III expeditionary medical hospital. As commander of the U.S. Joint Medical Task Force-Kuwait he was responsible for all health care and joint medical operations in the Kuwait, Qatar and Southern Iraq area of operations. He was also responsible for all medical logistics, veterinary and preventive medicine operations throughout CENTCOM in direct support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Future of Medical Research: Ensign Grace Landers and Lt. j.g. Jeremiah Ford are current students at USU where research is a top priority. *Photo by Lorna Geggis.*





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As the Director of DoD Telemedicine and Director, Navy Medicine Technology Integration Support Office from 1996 to 2000, he helped implement telemedicine in the Greek Navy and consulted the Rostropovich Foundation in implementing telemedicine to bring

pediatric cancer care to the children of Chernobyl.

Faison shares two qualities with the cadre of USU students and alumni—a passion for medicine and pride in service to his country. Those qualities provide him with the drive

to explore the vast opportunities offered in military medicine. “When I teach medical students, I tell them to not get to the end of your career having only spent it in a hospital. There are so many other opportunities out there to help people beyond the hospital bedside and that don’t necessarily involve a stethoscope or white coat,” says Faison.

Even today, as commanding officer of Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton, Faison is calling on the lessons he learned as a USU medical student. Camp Pendleton, the largest West Coast expeditionary training facility in the Marine Corps, is home to more than 70,000 active duty personnel. The Marine Corps “911 Force” continuously deploys in support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom to conduct security and stabilization operations, and upon their return some Marines show signs of both physical and psychological trauma.

“These Marines deploy a lot so there is a big focus on wounded warrior care here. I want to ensure we do it right” says Faison. “Some things I can’t cure right away. As an example, I can’t always completely heal traumatic brain injury through science, but as a physician I can also offer them my compassion and support while also giving these warriors and their families something equally important: hope.”

Practicing medicine through equal parts science, compassion and hope is a culture of the USU community that is quickly adopted by faculty, students and alumni. This philosophy is echoed throughout many of the university’s research initiatives.

Cmdr. Jack Tsao, M.D., D. Phil., associate professor of neurology

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at USU and currently the traumatic brain injury consultant for the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, says being stationed at the university allowed him to combine his desire to conduct research with the ability to apply those research findings directly to treating those men and women serving our nation. "By allowing me to do research, teach and treat patients, USU provided the ideal environment to bring an immediate and lasting impact of my research to helping heal our service members—especially those who need it most urgently—and that is extremely gratifying," Tsao says.

Through its agreements with other military treatment and research centers, USU offers its students and faculty, like Tsao, a gateway to collaborative research and the relevant clinical settings to test it out. For Tsao, solving the problem of phantom limb pain was an area of research that he felt could immediately help his patients.

Phantom limb pain is often felt by wounded warrior amputees. Developing a therapy to alleviate that pain through the use of mirrors is a concept first proposed by Vilayanur Ramachandran, M.D., a neuroscientist at the University of California-San Diego. Tsao and his colleagues were the first to conduct controlled studies of mirror therapy for phantom limb pain at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. "The unfortunately high volume of amputees at WRAMC provided an ideal setting to conduct a randomized, controlled trial of mirror therapy. I thought, if it works, we have something new to offer our patients. If not, at least we would have settled a scientific debate about the therapy and could then search for other treatments," Tsao says.



To further develop his mirror therapy research, as well as his other pain research initiatives, Tsao has been fortunate to have USU students assisting him. "Through mentoring students, I'm able to pass my research and knowledge on to the next generation of physicians and scientists," he says. The low student-to-professor ratio at USU fosters rare learning opportunities that enable many students to develop professional relationships with seasoned scientists and health practitioners.

Ensign Grace Landers, a third-year medical student at USU, says the support of the military community and mentors at USU cultivates a collaborative environment where information is shared easily and readily among students. "At USU, information flows up and down the chain without barriers. There is respect for each other among students and professors," Landers says. "That fosters a good research environment and sharing of ideas. This helps to keep research moving."

Born and raised in Alabama, Landers knew from a young age

Left: Ensign Grace Landers on the USU campus. Her research focuses on the propensity of students at USU to work with underserved populations. Photo by Lorna Geggis.

Above: Rear Adm. (s) Faison, a distinguished USU alumnus, being piped aboard as the new commanding officer of Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton on July 19, 2007.

Below: Rear Adm. (s) Faison's USU yearbook photo. Photos courtesy of Camp Pendleton Naval Hospital.



Clinton F. Faison, MD
LT, MC, USN

Pediatrics — NRMC, San Diego





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that she wanted to be a physician, but it was much later when she realized she wanted to pursue military medicine. While attending the University of South Alabama, Landers had a fortuitous encounter with a family friend who served in World War II, who ignited her interest in becoming a military doctor. “He is like my adopted grandpa and he frequently tells me stories about World War II. He was a sergeant responsible for taking prisoners out of one of the concentration camps to the hospital. He met a soldier at the hospital who asked him for a cigarette. When he bent down to hand the cigarette to him, he saw the soldier was holding his guts in,” Landers says. “I thought to myself: now that is the ultimate sacrifice and I want to be a part of healing those who are wounded while fighting for our country.”

Through her own research, Landers is showing how compassion and

hope complement the science of medicine. Her research focuses on the propensity of students at USU to work with underserved populations. Landers believes that her research has the potential to impact how physicians will be trained in the United States. For Landers, a desire to care for all people is an essential attribute if students are to become “good physicians.” Fostering and keeping that ideal alive, she says, is an important role for medical schools. Patients need to be the focus of medicine. “We need to show that physicians must maintain that caring attitude they enter medical school with,” Landers says. “Even as we become more knowledgeable physicians, we need to keep that curiosity for medicine and sensitivity to patients throughout our medical careers.”

As a military clinical psychology student, Lt. j.g. Jeremiah Ford knows very well the sensitivity needed to care for patients with

psychological health issues. For him, it is the science behind each patient’s condition that he values most in his studies at USU. “I never realized how much science and research there is behind the therapist’s chair,” Ford says. At USU, military clinical psychology students are taught through the scientist-practitioner model. “My idea of this teaching model is that at USU I am trained not only to properly care for my patients, but I am also trained to approach a patient’s condition as a scientist by looking into scientifically sound research on that patient’s condition and integrating those findings in my treatment,” he says. “In my study of clinical psychology, I have come to recognize the importance of compassion and hope for your patient, but my instruction at USU has instilled in me a respect for the scientific research that supports and validates my therapy with a patient.”



However, it is Ford's compassion and hope to provide a less-stigmatized environment for those seeking mental health care in the military that has encouraged him to pursue a clinical psychology degree at USU. "While serving as an NCO in the U.S. Navy as well as while training to become a surface warfare officer, I witnessed what I believed to be barriers to mental health care. I talked to many service members, both enlisted and officer, who felt that if they sought help, they might lose their clearances or respect as a leader. The stigma exists and thus it creates a barrier to care," he says.

Ford, who enlisted in the Navy in 1999, received his bachelor's degree in psychology and has spent the past several years pursuing his goal of studying military clinical psychology at USU. After four years in the Navy and with his eye on USU acceptance, he took a chance on an opening in the school's clinical psychology program. "There was only one slot for the Navy and I knew it was going to be competitive," he says. Another challenge facing Ford was that he had already begun the Seaman to

Admiral-21 Navy Fleet Commissioning Program to be trained as a surface warfare officer. "It took me eight or nine months to get administrative approval to apply," Ford says.

Ford was accepted into USU's military clinical psychology program in spring 2006 and is currently researching factors that may drive mental health



Above Left: Army Spc. Brian Wegner, a mirror therapy patient of Cmdr. Tsao's, demonstrates his considerable athletic skill with his prosthetic leg.

Above: Cmdr. Jack Tsao, MD, D. Phil., associate professor of neurology at USU works with a patient at Walter Reed doing clinical research on mirror therapy to treat phantom limb pain. Photos: William Clayton



help-seeking in the U.S. military. “It is possible that some factors may be unique to the military—multiple overseas deployments and separation from friends and families. I am learning to treat patients who, after I see them, may be going back out there with their squads on the front line. There is also a high likelihood that those patients will be exposed to additional stressors and traumas. Our training of military clinical psychologists requires a special, tailored way to look at and treat patients both inside and outside the theater of war,” Ford says. Through his

research, Ford hopes to uncover the unique factors and predispositions of military members who seek mental health care and encourage additional research in applying those factors to the way military clinical psychologists provide therapy. “I am hopeful that my research here at USU will impact how we approach mental health treatment and care for those in the military,” he says.

A true appreciation for the needs of military patients and a sensitivity to their special requirements are qualities USU’s graduate nursing

students already possess. The advanced education at USU gives these students an opportunity to apply their considerable experience while advancing their skills.

Designed for baccalaureate-prepared registered nurses, USU’s master’s degree nursing programs educate students to be family nurse practitioners, nurse anesthetists, perioperative clinical nurse specialists or adult mental health nurse practitioners. These programs, along with the doctoral program in nursing science, emphasize



research and give students an in-depth critical care environment in which to learn. The collaborative atmosphere at USU that Landers values is also appreciated by a recent family nurse practitioner nursing program graduate, Lt. Cmdr. Susanne Blankenbaker.

“Even though we have the military that unites us, we have all had different experiences and we all have something to learn from each other,” Blankenbaker says. “There are some of us that have been deployed and have real life

experiences of practicing in harm’s way.” Blankenbaker credits that experience and the opportunities to be immersed in real-time, real-life health care delivery while at USU for making her a stronger professional. “This place is not just about classroom learning,” she says.

While USU has a remarkable worldwide reputation as a center of excellence, many of its students, faculty and alumni attribute its culture—which combines a passion for medical science with a commitment to national service—for its incredible impact. For Cmdr. Tsao, USU provides the opportunity for applied research; for Lt. j.g. Ford, it is a place to learn to heal the psychological wounds of battle; for Lt. Cmdr. Blankenbaker, it is an environment from which to gain personal strength and essential skills; for Ensign Landers, it is a chance to serve those who serve. For Rear Adm. (select) Faison, USU is exceptional because it is more than just about medicine, “it is the immersion of learning in the warfighter environment that truly prepares us to care for those in harm’s way.” And all agree, there is no greater calling. ■



Above: Lt. j.g. Jeremiah Ford at the USU Library. Ford hopes his research at USU will impact how mental health treatment and care is approached in the military. Photo Lorna Geggis.

Left: As part of the additional 500 hours of training required for USU graduation, medical students train for emergency medicine during the Kerkesner and Bushmaster training exercises. This student was a participant in the 2009 Kerkesner exercise held at Fort Indian Town Gap, Pa. Photo courtesy of Ken Frager.

Special Note: At the time of this publication, Rear Adm. (s) Faison is scheduled to be assigned as Deputy Chief of Staff for Medical Operations, M3/M5, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Washington, D.C.



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