



*Promoting equity in engagement, access, and quality of mental health care for Veterans facing barriers to care, especially rural Veterans*

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# Communiqué

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### South Central MIRECC Anchor Sites:

LITTLE ROCK  
HOUSTON  
NEW ORLEANS  
OKLAHOMA CITY

**Mark Kunik, M.D., M.P.H.**  
*Acting Director*

**Michael R. Kauth, Ph.D.**  
*Co-Director and Associate Director for Education*

**John Fortney, Ph.D.**  
*Associate Director for Research*

**Patricia Dubbert, Ph.D.**  
*Associate Director for Research Training*

**Kathy L. Henderson, M.D.**  
*Associate Director for Improving Clinical Care*

## The New SC MIRECC Acting Director: Mark Kunik, M.D., M.P.H.

On January 12, 2013, Dr. Mark Kunik became Acting Director of the SC MIRECC. Dr. Kunik replaces former Director Dr. Greer Sullivan, who accepted a position as the Co-Principal Investigator of the Translational Science Award Grant at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences Translational Research Institute.



*Mark Kunik, M.D., M.P.H.*

Dr. Kunik has a solid background in health services research and VA program administration. His passion is to improve the lives of persons with dementia and their caregivers. His current grants examine whether aggression can be prevented by teaching caregivers skills to help address pain in dementia, communicate with persons with dementia, and choose meaningful, pleasurable activities to participate in together. His

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## Meet the SC MIRECC Researcher: Dinesh Mittal, MD

The Communiqué is proud to introduce our talented SC MIRECC researchers to our readers. This month we talk to Dr. Dinesh Mittal, who is a Staff Psychiatrist at Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System; an Investigator for the HSR&D Center for Mental Healthcare and Outcomes Research; and an Associate Professor with the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences Department of Psychiatry.

**Q.** What is your area of research?

Along with my mentors, Dr. Greer Sullivan and Dr. Patrick Corrigan, a national expert on stigma and its reduction, I have spent the past two years on research related to stigma of mental illness. I am interested in understanding stigma from the perspectives of providers as well as from people with mental illness. Specifically, my research seeks better information about what we as clinicians need to do during routine clinical care to help our Veterans and

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## KUNIK (continued from page 1)

patients' clinical dilemmas have had the most impact on his research career. "Throughout my training and to this date too many persons with dementia are tranquilized with medications for any behavioral problems without attention to what might be causing the problem." Thus, his research aims to improve mental health outside the mental health care setting.

Dr. Kunik has worked in the VA since 1988. "I was in medical school on my first clinical clerkship, which was geriatric medicine. I was clueless, did a lot of head nodding, and looked good until I was asked a question," joked Kunik. He joined the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center almost 20 years ago for opportunities to teach and do research. Today, he is a Professor in the Baylor College of Medicine Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences and Associate Director of the Houston VA Health Services Research & Development (HSR&D) Center for Quality of Care & Utilization Studies.

In addition to his work at Baylor and HSR&D, Dr. Kunik has also served as the SC MIRECC Associate Director for Research Training for nearly 10 years. He is most proud of the Training Residents in Psychiatry Scholarship (TRIPS) program. TRIPS provides PGY-II residents from VISN

16 medical schools with exposure to research careers in psychiatry. "I know that this program has been important to many residents in their career choices and it has influenced many residents to pursue academic paths," said Kunik.

Dr. Kunik is looking forward to his new responsibilities as the Acting Director of the SC MIRECC. "Nothing has been as important to my career satisfaction as the MIRECC, and I love my SC MIRECC colleagues. This is a wonderful opportunity to help out in a time of need, gain further leadership experience, and continue to work closely with MIRECC colleagues at local, VISN, and national levels. I will also press our continuing efforts to recruit new MIRECC investigators." He also looks forward to continuing to lead in collaboration with the SC MIRECC executive team. "In particular, we are fortunate that Michael Kauth remains co-director. He has long tenure in leading the MIRECC. I'm in an office right next to Michael and we talk multiple times a day. He will continue to play a critical role in leading our MIRECC."

In his spare time, Dr. Kunik enjoys listening to older rockers who continue to write new music, running in the city park with his good friend and dog, and eating dinners with his family. We wish him luck in his new role. ♦

**CBOC Mental Health Rounds**  
2nd Wednesdays Monthly  
8:00-9:00 AM CT  
1-800-767-1750; 26461#  
*Sponsored by the South Central MIRECC*

VISN 6, 16, and 23 mental health providers are invited to attend the next SC MIRECC CBOC Mental Health Rounds session titled "Why and How: Telemental Health" on Wednesday, February 13, 2013 at 8:00-9:00 a.m. (CT). This LiveMeeting session will be presented by Tracey Smith, Ph.D., Joseph Kennedy, M.D., and Russell Smith, Ph.D. At the conclusion of this educational program, learners will be able to:

1. Describe the historical background of telemental health and its link to VA telemental health today;
2. List three reasons for providing telemental health to Veterans;
3. Identify exclusion criteria and enrollment considerations for telemental health; and
4. Explain the what, where, and when of telemental health delivery.

Call 1-800-767-1750 and use access code 26461# to participate. Email [Ashley.McDaniel@va.gov](mailto:Ashley.McDaniel@va.gov) for registration and continuing education credit information.

# SC MIRECC EDUCATION BULLETIN BOARD



*Pictured: Guide to VA Mental Health Services for Veterans & Families Cover*

## Updated! Guide to VA Mental Health Services for Veterans & Families in English and Spanish

The Guide was created in 2011 by the SC MIRECC as an accessible translation of the VA Uniform Mental Health Services Handbook. It was extremely popular. This version is an update and expansion of the original. Furthermore, VA Central Office has adopted the new version as a VHA Publication that is published and distributed by the VHA Forms, Publications and Records Management Service. The Guide is currently available in printed form only in English, but you can download PDF versions in English or Spanish. The English version can be ordered through your nearest medical center facility Forms and Publication Officer by providing the following order information: *IB 10-492, P965548- Guide to VA Mental Health Services for Veterans and Families, dated July 30, 2012*. If you need help ordering the guide, email [Brian.Radford@va.gov](mailto:Brian.Radford@va.gov) in VA Central Office Mental Health Services. You can also download both versions of the Guide for free below.

[http://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/docs/Guide\\_to\\_VA\\_MH\\_Services\\_English.pdf](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/docs/Guide_to_VA_MH_Services_English.pdf)

[http://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/docs/Guide\\_to\\_VA\\_MH\\_Services\\_Spanish.pdf](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/VISN16/docs/Guide_to_VA_MH_Services_Spanish.pdf)



*Pictured: Working with Couples Module*

## Working with Couples Certificate of Completion Now Available

A non-accredited certificate of completion is now available for the Working with Couples training modules. The modules were developed by Drs. Michelle Sherman and Michael Kauth based on live training content created by Drs. Michelle Sherman, Ursula Bowling, and Dutch Doerman. The six modules provide an overview of essential content and skills for treating the Veteran and his or her partner or spouse who struggle with communication problems, anger and conflict, mental illness, trauma, and reintegration into the family after deployment. This training targets VA clinicians but may be helpful to non-VA providers who work with Veterans. Additional training and supervision are required to become competent to provide couples therapy. Funding for the Working with Couples program was provided by the SC MIRECC. Learners can download the certificate by accessing the Working with Couples training modules and taking the post-training evaluation. You will receive a link to the certificate when the training is complete. Learners can enter their name and date, and print the certificate. To access the modules, visit <http://www.vacouplestherapy.org/>. ♦

## ATTRIBUTION: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF MIRECC RESEARCH SUPPORT/EMPLOYMENT

SC MIRECC researchers and educators have a responsibility to ensure that the SC MIRECC receives proper credit for SC MIRECC-supported studies or projects in articles, presentations, interviews, and other professional activities in which the results of those projects are publicized or recognized. All investigators should credit the SC MIRECC if they receive either direct or indirect support from the SC MIRECC. For example, "This work was supported in part by the VA South Central (VISN 16) Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center." If you receive salary support from the SC MIRECC, you should list the SC MIRECC as an affiliation.

## MITTAL (continued from page 1)

minimize the disparities in clinical care.

**Q.** What active studies do you have going?

Recently, I have been involved in studies looking at the stigma perceptions of returning Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Veterans with PTSD and differences among primary care and mental health providers in stigmatizing attitudes and expectations of patients' behaviors.

To investigate stigma among VA providers, we are conducting an HSR&D-funded vignette study titled "Understanding Provider Decision-Making" in collaboration with Dr. Patrick Corrigan. The purpose of this study is to learn whether primary care and mental health providers differ in their attitudes and behaviors towards persons with and without serious mental illness (SMI). We expected provider attitudes and behaviors to differ by both specialty and discipline. However, preliminary results reveal that all provider groups (primary care and mental health doctors and nurses) viewed persons with SMI more negatively than they viewed persons without SMI on most attitudinal and behavioral outcome variables, including those related to treatment decisions/expectations. We were recently approved to receive additional pilot funds from HSR&D to develop a prototype stigma reduction intervention that is specifically tailored for mental health and primary care providers. This work will position us to submit a grant application to conduct a randomized clinical trial of this contact-based stigma reduction intervention for providers using two different modes of contact.

In October 2012, we published a critical review of interventions that exist to reduce self-stigma of mental illness. This work, titled "Empirical Studies of Self-Stigma Reduction Strategies: A Critical Review of the Literature," was very important for us because at our center we have been working in issues related to treatment engagement. The literature on self-stigma reveals that self-stigma can decrease help-seeking, treatment and adherence, and self-esteem, as well as other life pursuits in general. Drs. Sullivan, Corrigan, Lakshminarayana Chekuri, and Ms. Elise Allee were coauthors. We identified two broad approaches in the literature used to decrease self-stigma. One approach was to decrease the individual's self-stigmatizing attitudes and beliefs using psychoeducation and cognitive behavioral therapy. The second was to focus on using strategies that empower individuals in their life pursuits, improve self-esteem and coping skills, and receive and adhere to treatment, instead of

changing the self-stigmatizing attitudes. We recommend that researchers focus more on self-stigma conceptualization, measurement tools and theoretical frameworks, and we are interested in continuing to develop this work.

Finally, we recently concluded a small qualitative study to understand returning OEF/OIF Veterans' perceptions of public stigma. In this study, we tried to discover whether public stigma was internalized as self-stigma, to find out whether perceived stigma and/or self-stigma had affected their treatment-seeking decisions, and to determine if/how they felt that stigma related to a diagnosis of PTSD differed from stigmatization of other serious mental disorders. This work will be published very soon. We are also hoping to build on this qualitative work and begin to explore the kinds of interventions that might be useful to reduce stigma of mental illness among returning Veterans. Drs. Karen Drummond, Dean Blevins, Geoff Curran, Corrigan, and Sullivan are co-authors.

**Q.** What are the implications or potential benefits of your research?

We hope our research results will help us develop methods to help persons for whom self-stigma is a problem and to develop the methods for clinicians to be aware of our biases that may in some ways contribute to disparities in care of persons with mental illness.

**Q.** What person or experience had the most influence on your research career?

Credit for what I have accomplished so far definitely goes to my mentors! Dr. Mark Kunik was one of my earliest research mentors. Since I came to Little Rock, Drs. Sullivan, Rick Owen and John Fortney have shaped my career. Overall, I think my research involvement has made me a better clinician.

**Q.** What advice would you give to junior investigators and to people who are new to research?

Find mentors who are very productive, have more to do than they are able, are good listeners, are generous, who focus on your strengths, provide constructive criticism and with whom you feel comfortable sharing your fears and

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insecurities about your career.

**Q.** How can people get in touch with you if they have questions about your work?  
VA e-mail works the best for me (Dinesh.Mittal@va.gov) but my office number is (501) 257-1238. ♦

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## **SC MIRECC ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

### **SC MIRECC Hires New Budget Analyst: David “Dave” Henson, MS**

The SC MIRECC is pleased to welcome Dave Henson as its new Budget Analyst. Henson graduated from the University of Arkansas in 2008 with a Master’s Degree in Operations Management. After 20 glorious years, Henson retired from the Air Force in December 2011. He then went to work at the Kimberly Clark Corporation in Conway, Arkansas. His goal after retiring from the Air Force was to find a job at the VA where he could give back to the Veterans who have given so much for our country. As the SC MIRECC Budget Analyst, his role is crucial for ensuring that the SC MIRECC has available the resources it needs to achieve its mission to promote equity in engagement, access, and quality of mental health care for Veterans facing barriers to care.

While it has been challenging transitioning during 14 months from the Air Force to a civilian company and then to the VA, Henson is excited about the opportunity. “It will take time to learn the VA way of doing business but with the great team that is at the MIRECC they will do everything they can to make it as smooth a transition as possible for me,” said Henson.

Henson is married with one daughter. From March through October, Henson spends weekends at Lake Ouachita in Hot Springs, Arkansas fishing, tubing, wakeboarding, skiing and watching sunsets on the lake. He also enjoys lifting weights and working out at the gym.

### **Estella Morris, Ph.D. Receives 2013 Father Joseph Biltz Award from Just Communities of Arkansas**

SC MIRECC Consumer Advisory Board Member Dr. Estella Morris received the 2013 Father Joseph Biltz Award on January 31 from Just Communities of Arkansas. Dr. Morris, Program Manager for the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System’s Comprehensive Homeless Center, has changed the way we respond to our homeless military Veterans. Through her work and her passionate advocacy, she has helped expand services to this vulnerable and under-served population to include housing, employment, successful re-unification with family members, and re-integration into the community. She has worked tirelessly to make sure none of our Veterans is left behind. Recipients of the Biltz Award are recognized for their history of service and achievements in advancing Just Communities of Arkansas’s mission to bring people together to achieve inclusion, equity and justice for all.

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## Michael Kauth, Ph.D. Named to Editorial Board of New LGBT Health Journal Launching in 2013

Dr. Michael Kauth, SC MIRECC Co-Director and Associate Director for Education, has been selected for the editorial board of LGBT Health, a new peer-reviewed journal that will launch in fall 2013. The journal will identify crucial LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) healthcare needs and the means to address them, providing a much-needed authoritative source and international forum in all areas pertinent to LGBT health and healthcare services. Dr. Kauth also serves as LGBT Program Coordinator for VA Central Office Patient Care Services alongside Jillian Shipherd, Ph.D. Dr. Shipherd will also serve on the journal's editorial board. This promising new journal will promote greater awareness; encourage further research; improve treatment options, patient care, and outcomes; and foster increased funding in this critical field. ♦

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