



CIRWH NEWS FLASH

Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Women's Health

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MEDICAL BRANCH

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From the Director's Desk



In May, we celebrated National Women's Health Week at UTMB. Dr. Arthur Agatston, of South Beach Diet fame, was the guest speaker. His presentation educated

us about the epidemic of obesity and how we can combat it. He was very generous with his time, signing books and answering questions of countless men and women who attended his talk. I hope that everyone who attended enjoyed this opportunity to meet with him.

CIRWH also sponsored a poster presentation of research in women's health, offering prizes of \$500 and \$250 in basic, clinical and translational research. This year, the quality of the 31 presentations submitted made the choice for awards so difficult that I had to add a third place award of \$150 in each category. Please join me in congratulating the winners on their outstanding presentations. Their pictures are on the last page of this issue.

One of the main tasks of CIRWH is to support the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) scholar training program: Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH). CIRWH supports this program by helping with costs of visiting speakers,

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Introducing the 2006 BIRCWH Scholars

In 1999, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) were reformed to focus more research attention on investigation of gender differences, disparity of health care services, and women's health issues. The Office of Research on Women's Health was created, and large amounts of money were set aside for the purpose of bringing the knowledge of women's medicine in line with general medical knowledge. Part of that money was earmarked for the training of future researchers who would focus on women's health care. UTMB's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, under Dr. Garland Anderson, was one of the first 12 departments to be funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development for scholar career development in Women's Reproductive Health Research (WRHR). Dr. Abbey Berenson, director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Women's Health (CIRWH) was one of only 22 directors chosen from across the country to be funded to implement a scholar education program, titled "Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH)".

We are very proud to represent UTMB's role at the forefront of training these young scholars. Introducing the 2006 BIRCWH scholars:

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Dr. Agatston delights Galveston crowd

Right: Dr. Agatston explains the "End of the Diet Debates" to the group of invited guests.



Dr. Agatston signs copies of his diet books between presentations.



The luncheon presented to the invited guests carefully followed the South Beach diet.



Dr. Tracy Nguyen-Oghalai

1991 **M.D.**—UTMB

1993 **Residency**—The University of Tennessee at Memphis

2001 **Fellowships**—Allergy/immunology **and** rheumatology

Baylor College of Medicine

2003 **Clinical Fellowship**—Rheumatology

The University of California at San Francisco

Board Certified—Internal medicine, rheumatology and allergy/immunology.

Mentors—Professor Jean L. Freeman, internal medicine, geriatrics; and Professor Kenneth Ottenbacher, internal medicine, geriatrics

Dr. Nguyen-Oghalai investigates the impact of rheumatic diseases on functional recovery among hospitalized patients. For instance, medical rehabilitation following a stroke and other acute illnesses can reduce disability and improve functional mobility, but Nguyen-Oghalai and her colleagues found that osteoarthritis seemed to delay functional recovery and prolong hospitalization. On average, patients with osteoarthritis needed a day and a half more hospitalization to achieve the same functional gain as patients without these problems.

Understanding the factors associated with successful rehabilitation and identifying subgroups of patients with need for additional therapy are topics of considerable research interest, Nguyen said, but they are also matters of importance to patients with rheumatic diseases because extended hospitalization brings increased costs, and currently, there is no additional resource allocated to rheumatic patients to pay for this additional length of stay. Medicare does not recognize rheumatic diseases as comorbidities. Since both rheumatic diseases are more prevalent among women than men, the burden of cost for this delayed functional recovery and the resulting disability falls more heavily on women than men.

Dr. Nguyen plans to investigate the impact of gender on functional recovery after acute illnesses and extend her investigation by examining the impact of other rheumatic diseases as comorbidities.



Dr. Venkataraman Sriraman

1992 **B.S.**—Medical Laboratory Technology, Pondicherry, India

1996 **M.S.**—Medical Biochemistry, Pondicherry, India

2001 **Ph.D.**—Medical Biochemistry, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, India

2001–06 **Postdoctoral Fellowship**—Molecular cellular biology,

Baylor College of Medicine

Mentors—Professor Randall Urban, internal medicine, endocrinology

Venkataraman's research focuses on ovulation, a complex process critical to successful mammalian reproduction. Understanding the mechanisms of ovulation is of great importance to the future understanding and treatment of infertility problems.

The ovulatory process involves the release of a fertilizable oocyte (an early stage of the egg) from a mature follicle or sac in the ovary. This process resembles an inflammatory reaction mediated by granulosa cells (small cells of the follicle) that require the action of steroid hormones and cytokines (regulatory proteins) in order to occur. Progesterone receptor is such a steroid hormone receptor necessary for ovulation. We know that mice with no progesterone receptor do not ovulate and exhibit severe fertility effects; however, the precise mechanisms by which progesterone receptor mediates these events are poorly understood. One objective of Venkataraman's research is to study these mechanisms to determine the progesterone receptor targets that mediate ovulation.

For instance, gonadotropins (hormones that stimulate the growth and activity of ovaries and testes) are in part mediated by inflammatory cytokines and growth factors important to the development and differentiation of the ovarian follicle. Following the surge of gonadotropins, granulosa cells produce cytokines—namely tumor necrosis factor- α and interleukin-6—but their downstream effects on the ovulatory process are yet to be determined. Venkataraman's goal at this stage is to understand their role in ovarian physiology and pathology.



Dr. Navkiran Shokar

1989 **M.A.**–University of Cambridge, England

1992 **M.D.**–University of Oxford, England

1996 **Residency**– Family medicine England

1996–1999 **Residency**–Family practice, St. Joseph Hospital, Houston

2003 **M.P.H.**–The University of Texas School of Public Health, Houston

Mentors–Professor Susan C. Weller PM&C; and Professor Kyriakos Markides PM&C

While completing her masters in public health, Dr. Shokar became interested in gender and racial/ethnic health disparities in cancer treatment, and this led to her investigation of gender and racial/ethnic differences in the rates of colon cancer screening.

In the US, knowledge and understanding about the role of screening in prevention of cancer is especially low among minorities. African Americans suffer disproportionately with the highest mortality rates of all racial/ethnic groups. Though this has been attributed to many sources, there is increasing evidence that mortality differences can be explained by an underutilization of screening. Dr. Shokar believes that part of the reason for this underutilization is that strategies promoting colorectal screening are not gender and/or racial/ethnically grounded. For instance, little is known about racial/ethnic or gender differences in patient preferences for the different colorectal cancer screening test options. Shokar is currently assessing factors correlated with past colorectal cancer screening in these groups by conducting a cross-sectional survey of 600 African American, Hispanic and Non-Hispanic white patients of both genders.

As Texas minority communities grow, it will be more and more important for healthcare providers to be aware of patient preferences when suggesting colorectal screening options. Dr. Shokar intends to use her findings to design clinic and community interventions better tailored to individual minorities and women.

First BIRCWH scholar alumna

On August 1, 2006, Dr. Navkiran Shokar became the first UTMB BIRCWH scholar to receive news of her NIH/NCI grant award. Her K award was also the first such NIH award in the Department of Family Medicine.

Dr. Shokar was delighted to have had her Notice of Grant Award, but she was somewhat sorry to be leaving the helpful shelter of the BIRCWH. She wrote, “The BIRCWH program has been a wonderful resource for me, providing formal and informal activities equally important to career development. As a result, I have been able to gain a vast amount of knowledge in a short time.

I have been exposed to a cadre of mentors, unsurpassed in their knowledge and experience, and they have made themselves available and willing to help, often at very short notice! During this time, I have also been able



Professors Jean L. Freeman and Abbey Berenson answer scholar's questions over lunch.

to develop strong peer relationships with clinical, translational and basic science researchers from across the UTMB campus. These relationships will be invaluable as I progress in my research career, just as they will prove to be invaluable to future scholars.”

Our Congratulations to Dr. Shokar.

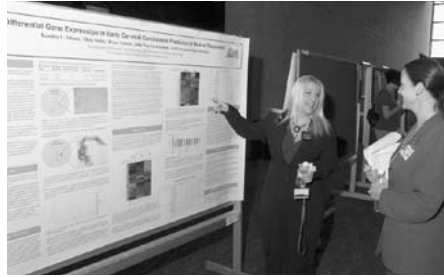
NWHW Poster Winners



From left to right Winners of the NWHW Poster Presentation: Heather Littleton, 3rd place Clinical Research; Min Chen, 3rd place Basic Research; Egle Bytautiene, 1st place Basic Research; Essam Othman, 1st place Translational Research; Kendra Stisser, 1st place Clinical Research; Tracy Nguyen-Oghalai, 2nd place Clinical Research; Nima Goharkhay, 2nd Place Basic Research; Sangeeta Jain, 2nd place Translational Research; Priscila Salgado(not present), 3rd place Translational Research



Mentor Dr. Diaz-Arrastia and Stisser with winning poster



Judge Radecki-Breitkopf listens to Stisser's winning presentation

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seminars, transportation to medical meetings where scholars can present their research, editing support and seed grant funds.

With the graduation of Dr. Shokar, we have two scholars in the BIRCWH program: Dr. Tracy Nguyen-Oghalai, and Dr. Venkateraman Sriraman. (Plans are in place to add a third and fourth scholar soon.) This issue is devoted to telling you more about these young scholars who are devoting their careers to women's health research. I think that you will agree with me that they are very deserving of our support.

Abbey Berenson

NWHW Lunch and Lecture



Dr. Agatston at the podium



Discussing the lunch or the lecture?

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