

Charles A. King Trust

Postdoctoral Fellowship Program

Clinical and Health Services Research

2020 Grant Recipients

Rachel Epstein, M.D., M.Sc.

Assistant Professor

Boston Medical Center

Mentor: Benjamin Linas, MD, MPH

“Leveraging Perinatal Touchpoints to Improve the Hepatitis C Virus and Opioid Use Disorder Care Cascades”

Amidst the current opioid overdose crisis, 1.4 million women of reproductive age report non-medical opioid use. Both opioid use disorder (OUD) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) prevalence among pregnant women have quadrupled since 2000. Many women (30-56%) begin medications to treat OUD during pregnancy, but retention post-partum declines significantly and is associated with high opioid overdose and mortality rates. Furthermore, nationally, only 50% of adults with HCV are aware of their infection, and fewer than 40% of those diagnosed have been treated. Research is needed to identify venues to increase efforts to improve OUD and HCV treatment and prevention.

Perinatal care provides longitudinal access to women over a nearly one-year period, and pregnancy may be a motivating time for women to address health care needs. Yet, little data exist to measure the role of the perinatal care venue to improve OUD and HCV care engagement. This study aims to: (1) Characterize OUD and HCV care cascade follow-up: testing, diagnosis, linkage to care, treatment initiation and retention, to compare outcomes in women of reproductive age with and without a past 2-year perinatal care touchpoint, and (2) Build a microsimulation model using Aim 1 data and literature estimates to analyze the clinical and health economic effects of leveraging the perinatal care venue to reduce opioid overdoses and infant and population-level HCV transmission. Together, these projects will identify the impact of the perinatal (prenatal and post-partum) care venue on improving follow-up along each cascade, and delineate how resource allocation at different steps along the cascades could help achieve national opioid overdose and HCV elimination goals. This will also provide a model platform to incorporate additional disease processes, such as HIV, to help determine the most clinically- and cost-effective care interventions for families at the center of the opioid overdose, HCV and HIV epidemics.

Yan Yan, Ph.D.

Postdoctoral Fellow

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

Mentor: Curtis Huttenhower, PhD

“Strain-level Epidemiology and Diet-linked Gut Metatranscriptome Risk Factors in Colorectal Cancer”

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is one of the leading causes of cancer-related death globally. While its genetics have been studied extensively, the contributions of environmental factors, such as the intestinal microbiota, are less clearly understood. Neither the causal mechanisms nor corresponding microbial strains have been pinpointed for CRC. We focus on identifying strain-specific microbial variants and genetic products that could contribute to CRC, and characterizing their regulatory behavior and interaction with dietary and lifestyle factors.

Aim 1: Test the hypothesis that CRC risk and tumorigenesis is driven by specific strains, subspecies, and their associated functional genetic content within species associated with the disease.

1.1 Test for significant phylogenetic enrichment with respect to CRC for subspecies within CRC-associated clades.

1.2 Identify individual microbial features that define CRC-associated strains and their resulting functional potential.

Aim 2: Test the hypothesis that CRC-associated genes within risk-associated or protective gut microbes are differentially regulated with respect to dietary and lifestyle factors.

2.1 Determine the baseline transcriptional regulatory behavior of CRC-associated species' pangenomes in the human gut.

2.2 Find significant associations between gut microbial transcriptional regulatory responses and known CRC-risk or protective dietary and lifestyle factors.

The proposal includes data summarizing novel strain- and gene- based meta-analyses of the largest CRC population to date, results from my recent study of the role of microbiome in Lynch syndrome, and our analysis platforms for meta'omic human microbiome epidemiology. My long-term career goal is to pursue translational epidemiological research in the CRC microbiome, which is supported by my background in human microbiome and microbiology. The fellowship will support my work with Dr. Huttenhower and help to continue my early-stage career in CRC prevention and mitigation with access to the resources of his laboratory, the Harvard Chan School, Harvard University, and the rich Boston life sciences community.

2019 Grant Recipients

Avika Dixit, MBBS

Instructor

Boston Children's Hospital

Mentor: Maha Farhat, MD

“Insights into multidrug resistant tuberculosis using large scale genomic data”

Introduction: The purpose of this proposal is to leverage large scale public data to generate country specific drug resistance estimates for tuberculosis (TB) and to characterize the factors driving the spread of drug resistance (DR). These data will be useful in the roll-out of the newer treatment regimens and in designing public health interventions targeted to geographic regions.

Methods: I will utilize more than 20,000 publicly available Mycobacterium tuberculosis genomes and use machine learning methods to determine genotype-phenotype associations between mutations and DR. I will employ machine learning methods previously validated and improve the predictive ability of the algorithm with the larger dataset available to me. I will determine DR for second line anti-tubercular drugs and aggregate these data at the country level, thus creating country-specific antibiograms. I will use WHO reported multidrug resistant TB estimates to correct for oversampling of DR. I will create a mechanism to have these data be periodically updated and available publicly. Additionally, I will employ methods utilized in my previous work including phylogenetic analyses and molecular dating methods to characterize the acquisition, evolution and transmission of DR across the world. I will perform additional analyses to interpret the spread of DR in the context of programmatic factors, and identify bacterial factors associated with it. I will perform a sub-analysis focused on compensatory mutations affecting the spread of fluoroquinolone resistant in TB.

Expected Impact: Estimates are currently available for DR prevalence to first- and second-line anti-TB drugs. My proposed work will not only provide current estimates but will also create a mechanism to continually improve the prediction accuracy and update estimates as newer genomic data becomes available. The study of DR spread at a global scale will provide historical context to this ever-expanding public health problem and help identify potential targets for intervention.

Jason Maley, M.D.

Research Fellow

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center / Harvard Medical School

Mentor: Jennifer P. Stevens

“Development of a Novel Model to Understand Health-Care Waste and Value in the Intensive Care Unit”

The intensive care unit (ICU) is a costly and complex setting of care, yet the value, or benefit relative to cost, of many practices in the ICU is unknown. Healthcare spending that does not benefit patients is considered waste, and is common throughout medicine, including within the ICU. Given the continued rise of healthcare costs in the setting of limited critical care resources, research examining value and waste in the ICU is urgently needed.

One opportunity to reduce healthcare waste may come from understanding the excessive use of ICU resources. After an ICU patient’s critical illness has stabilized and no longer requires ICU-level care, he or she often remains in the ICU for monitoring. However, there is no consensus around how long these patients need to be safely monitored. This time period, after stability and before transfer to a less acute level of care, comes at a cost to both patient and healthcare system. Fundamentally, excessive monitoring in the ICU represents a misalignment of clinical need and hospital resources, and is controlled by physician discretion. Stabilized patients remaining in ICU beds are unable to progress in their care. More acutely, critically ill patients elsewhere in the hospital and waiting to transfer into those occupied beds may have meaningful and harmful delays in care. Understanding and mitigating this waste would reduce healthcare costs and increase ICU bed availability for critically ill patients.

To develop a novel approach to improve value in the ICU, I aim to: 1) investigate drivers of variation in the discretionary use of ICU resources and 2) examine if this variation in discretionary resource use affects patient outcomes and health-system performance. This will serve as the foundation for my NIH mentored K-level grant application, which will focus on understanding the value of care delivered to critically-ill patients.

2018 Grant Recipients

Joshua Barocas, M.D.

Assistant Professor of Medicine

Boston University School of Medicine/Boston Medical Center

Mentor: Benjamin P. Linas, MD, MPH

“Hospital-based Innovations to Decrease Overdose and Serious Bacterial Infections Among People who Inject Drugs”

In the US in the last decade, injection opioid use has more than doubled and heroin-related overdose deaths have quadrupled. Along with overdose, HIV, and hepatitis C virus (HCV), people who inject drugs (PWID)—specifically opioids—are also at risk of significant morbidity and mortality associated with serious bacterial infections such as infective endocarditis. Hospitalizations for these infections have increased up to twelve-fold in the last decade. Longitudinal investigation of interventions to decrease

these infections is necessary to improve outcomes in this population, but is challenging due to stigma associated with drug use as well as the transient and heterogeneous nature of PWID. Simulation modeling can augment clinical trials and cohort studies by projecting the clinical and economic outcomes over longer time horizons and can be adapted to model different populations. Given the rapid expansion of the US opioid epidemic, novel studies of the impact of interventions are urgently needed. Touch points with the healthcare system, such as during hospitalization, are opportunities for intervention. I propose the following specific aims: 1) To develop and empirically validate a simulation model of injection opioid use that accounts for changes in individual injecting behavior over time and project the medical consequences of injection opioid use, including overdose and bacterial infections, and 2) To determine the clinical impact, costs, and cost-effectiveness of inpatient initiation of medications for opioid use disorder for hospitalized persons who inject opioids. When I have completed the model development process, I will have generated an outstanding platform for research identifying strategies to improve outcomes for PWID.

Minttu Roenn, Ph.D.

Research Associate

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

Mentor: Joshua Salomon, Ph.D

“Adverse Reproductive Health Outcomes in the United States Associated with Chlamydia and Gonorrhea”

Sexually transmitted infections (STI) are a significant cause of adverse reproductive health outcomes. Chlamydia and gonorrhea are common bacterial STI associated with pelvic inflammatory disease, ectopic pregnancy and tubal factor infertility. The ability of current testing and treatment practices for chlamydia and gonorrhea to prevent adverse reproductive health outcomes in women is not well understood. There is evidence of protective effect of chlamydia screening against pelvic inflammatory diseases. Currently, annual screening for chlamydia and gonorrhea for women below age 25 is recommended in the United States. We aim to estimate the impact of chlamydia and gonorrhea screening in the United States on associated adverse reproductive health outcomes for 2000-2015, and estimate the predicted future impact under different policy scenarios allowing for changes in testing and treatment patterns. We will use calibrated transmission models to estimate the frequency, duration and health and economic consequences of sequelae. One of the advantages of transmission models is their ability to account for indirect effects of interventions. We have developed transmission models of chlamydia and gonorrhea, and they have been calibrated to time series data for the United States using case report data and prevalence estimates. By adding adverse sequelae to the models as explicit health states, we can extend the analyses to cover broader adverse health outcomes caused by the infections. Sequelae probability and associated quality of life measures and costs will be estimated through literature reviews. The key products of this work will include estimates of the number of sequelae averted by existing prevention efforts, and gains in quality of life, as well as cost-effectiveness of screening interventions, and the analyses will provide estimates of outcomes if services are improved or reduced in the future.

Chad Straight, M.S., Ph.D.

Postdoctoral Research Associate

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Mentor: Mark Miller, Ph.D., M.S.

“Sex-Specific Mechanisms of Obesity-Induced Muscle Weakness in Older Adults”

A hallmark of human aging is a shift in body composition towards reduced skeletal muscle mass and greater adiposity. This shift in body composition is accompanied by a steep decline in physical function, which is exacerbated by the presence of obesity. Notably, older women are at greater risk for obesity-related disability than men. Skeletal muscle power (force x velocity) is a critical determinant of physical function in older adults, and overweight and obese older adults have lower specific power (power per unit muscle size) than their normal weight counterparts. As a result, obese older adults are more likely to have difficulty with activities of daily living, such as rising from a chair or climbing stairs. Currently, there is limited research regarding the fundamental molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying obesity-induced muscle weakness, and this knowledge gap represents a critical barrier to our understanding of how obesity results in poor physical performance and disability in older adults. Preliminary data from our laboratory indicate that cellular muscle function is related to adiposity in a sex-specific manner among healthy older adults, such that women are more affected than men. Thus, the objective of our application is to identify the effects of adiposity at the molecular and cellular levels that cause reductions in whole muscle power among obese older adults. In this context, the aims of this study are two-fold: 1) elucidate the sex-specific effects of adiposity on skeletal muscle function at the molecular, cellular and whole muscle levels in older adults and 2) identify the sex-specific effects of adiposity on skeletal muscle composition and size at the molecular and cellular levels. Characterizing the fundamental mechanisms that lead to reduced skeletal muscle power should aid in the development of targeted, and, potentially sex-specific, exercise and pharmaceutical countermeasures to forestall physical disability in obese older adults.

2017 Grant Recipients

Lisa Bebell, M.D.

Instructor, Harvard Medical School and Assistant in Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital
Massachusetts General Hospital

Mentor: Ingrid Bassett, M.D. M.P.H.

“HIV Infection, Antiretroviral Therapy and Placental Inflammation in Uganda: Potential Mechanisms for Poor Outcomes in HIV-Exposed Infants”

Introduction: Recent success in preventing mother-to-child HIV transmission with antiretroviral therapy has decreased the incidence of congenital HIV. However, >1 million infants are HIV-exposed but uninfected (HEU) annually, and have poorer early-life outcomes than HIV-unexposed infants. We hypothesize that placental inflammation is a potential mechanism for poor early-life outcomes in HIV-exposed infants; and that HIV infection of the placenta and high placental tenofovir disoproxil fumarate (TDF) levels are drivers of placental inflammation.

Methods: We propose to 1) compare the prevalence of histologic chronic placental inflammation (CPI) between HIV-infected and HIV-uninfected women, 2) determine mechanisms by which HIV leads to CPI, and the effect of CPI on birth and neonatal outcomes. To accomplish these aims, we will enroll a prospective cohort of 160 HIV-infected and 160 HIV-uninfected women in Mbarara, Uganda where HIV prevalence is 12%. We will perform placental histopathology to determine presence of CPI and neonatal heelstick DNA PCR to determine neonatal HIV status. We will evaluate the presence of HIV in the

placenta using immunohistochemistry (IHC) stains and determine the association between placental HIV and CPI. Lastly, we will measure TDF diphosphate (TDF-DP) levels in umbilical cord erythrocytes and determine the association between TDF-DP levels and CPI among HIV-infected women. We will use multivariable logistic regression to determine independent predictors of CPI, and fit additional models restricted to HIV-infected women.

Expected Results: We hypothesize HIV-infected women have a higher prevalence of histologic CPI than HIV-uninfected women. In addition, we hypothesize that placental HIV infection and high TDF-DP levels are associated with histologic CPI and may contribute to poor early-life outcomes among HIV-exposed infants. We will publish three manuscripts from this work, and our findings will form the foundation of an NIH K23 career development proposal comparing early-life outcomes between children born to HIV-infected mothers with and without CPI.

Jonathan Iaccarino, M.D.

Postdoctoral Fellow

Boston Medical Center

Mentor: Renda Wiener MD MPH

“Comorbidities in Lung Cancer Screening: Improving Decision-Making and Patient Selection”

The purpose of this proposal is to evaluate how comorbidities influence patient and clinician decision-making for lung cancer screening in order to improve patient selection and screening outcomes. The National Lung Screening Trial demonstrated a 20% decrease in lung cancer mortality with yearly low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) screening of high-risk smokers. Screening-eligible patients with serious comorbidities are less likely to experience this mortality of benefit of screening, while simultaneously having greater risk of experiencing potential harms. As a result, multiple organizations recommend LDCT screening, but advise against screening patients with serious comorbidities that limit life expectancy. At some unknown threshold, the severity of a patient's comorbidities will cause risks of screening and subsequent diagnostic and therapeutic interventions to outweigh potential mortality benefits. In order to optimize LDCT screening outcomes, it is imperative to help clinicians discriminate patients who can benefit from screening from those who are more likely to experience harm. As a first step, we must understand the profile of comorbid disease among the real-world population being screened, how comorbidities influence LDCT screening referral, and how comorbidities factor into patient and decision decision-making for LDCT screening. This study will utilize a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to evaluate patients who have undergone LDCT screening at Boston Medical Center. Data from these approaches will be used to accomplish the following aims: 1) Characterize comorbidities that are associated with referral for LDCT screening; 2) Assess how clinicians and patients incorporate comorbidities into decisions about whether to pursue LDCT screening. Results from this study will help to improve patient and clinician decision-making for LDCT screening and will inform a future multicenter study evaluating the comorbidity threshold at which the harms of screening outweigh the benefits.

Ryan Jacoby, Ph.D.

Clinical Fellow

Massachusetts General Hospital

Mentor: Sabine Wilhelm, Ph.D.

“The Role of Cognitive Control in the Transdiagnostic Conceptualization of "Intrusive Thoughts””

Transdiagnostic conceptualizations have identified phenomenological similarities across three types of repetitive, negative thinking (i.e., "intrusive thoughts"): obsessions in obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), worries in generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and ruminations in depression. However, the majority of research examining commonalities of these mental intrusions has relied solely on self-report questionnaires; which while appropriate for comparing thought content, are less adept at measuring thought processes. Impairments in inhibiting and disengaging from maladaptive intrusions (i.e., cognitive control) is one hypothesized behaviorally-quantifiable process across intrusive thoughts; yet, this theory has not been empirically tested. Accordingly, the proposed study utilizes in vivo behavioral paradigms of executive functioning and attention as well as psychophysiological measures to examine: (a) whether cognitive control (i.e., response inhibition, set shifting) is a transdiagnostic mechanism of action underlying these three patterns of thinking, and (b) the extent to which such impairments are associated with in vivo experiences of intrusive thoughts utilizing standardized procedures of script-driven imagery to induce obsessions, worries, and depressive ruminations in the laboratory. This paradigm will allow for examination of potentially important conceptual differences among intrusions using self-report (e.g., ego-dystonic nature), behavioral (e.g., eye tracking), emotional (e.g., facial expressions), and psychophysiological (e.g., skin conductance) measures. Given the recent RDoC initiative at the National Institute of Mental Health, which emphasizes the identification of transdiagnostic neurally-linked mechanisms, this project is well-aligned with national funding priorities. This multi-method study will provide pilot data for an NIMH Career Development award proposal, in which I will conduct a comprehensive examination of the neural mechanisms of cognitive control across intrusive thoughts. My ultimate aim is to use this knowledge to reduce the substantial public health impact and burden of these disorders (OCD, GAD, depression) by tailoring transdiagnostic interventions to address maladaptive, intrusive thinking patterns.

2016 Grant Recipients

Franziska Plessow, Dr. rer. nat.

Massachusetts General Hospital

Mentor: Elizabeth Lawson, M.D., M.M.Sc.

“Cognitive Control as a Biomarker and Target for Novel Interventions in Low-Weight Eating Disorders”

Low-weight eating disorders (EDs) are characterized by extremes in food consumption and eating-related behavior, resulting in marked low weight. Their consequences are severe and often persist, and the illness onset is early with peak in the second decade of life, during a critical period of brain development. The pathophysiology of low-weight EDs, specifically the mechanisms determining restrictive eating versus restriction with binge/purging and differences in illness course, are mostly unknown. I hypothesize that alterations in cognitive control, the mechanisms that enable individuals to act on goals despite competing response tendencies, to flexibly adapt to environmental changes, and to prioritize long-term goals over short-term gains, represent a biomarker for adolescent low-weight EDs with distinct characteristics for different phenotypes and illness trajectories. In low-weight EDs, cognitive control processes and their neural pathways are markedly altered with findings indicating phenotype-specific profiles. Pilot data point toward an association between control alterations and symptom severity in adult ED patients. However, the prevalence of alterations in cognitive control in

early disease stages and during adolescence as prime onset period and its relation to future clinical outcome is yet to be established. Using an innovative multi-component multi-level approach to cognitive control and leveraging an ongoing NIMH R01, I will characterize cognitive control competencies together with resting-state functional connectivity of the cognitive control network in 10-21 year-old females with restrictive eating and/or binge/purge behavior and healthy controls. I hypothesize that: (1) Altered cognitive control underlies patterns of restriction, binge eating, and purging, and differentiates low-weight ED patients from healthy, normal-weight controls. (2) Cognitive control abilities at baseline determine 4.5- and 9-month clinical outcome. This work aims to provide a systematic test of the predictive value of cognitive control profiles for phenotype and trajectory of low-weight EDs, identifying novel therapeutic targets to improve clinical care for this high-risk population.

Donald Robinaugh, Ph.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

Mentor: Naomi Simon, M.D., M.Sc.

“Examining Symptom Decoupling and Propagating Causal Influence as Intra-individual Mechanisms of Change in Psychotherapy”

There is extensive evidence that many forms of psychotherapy are effective in treating a wide range of mental disorders. Yet, despite substantial advances in our understanding of what is effective, we know very little about how psychotherapies have their effect. In the proposed project, I will take a novel intra-individual network analysis approach to studying mechanisms of change complicated grief therapy (CGT), an empirically supported treatment for complicated grief (CG). According to the network approach, CG is a causal system of mutually reinforcing symptoms that arise together following the death of a loved one and settle into a pathological equilibrium. From this perspective, the symptoms are not passive diagnostic indicators of an underlying condition. Rather, they are active psychological variables that play a causal role in the maintenance of the disorder. Consequently, the symptoms themselves and the relations among them become potential targets for intervention and, thus, potential mechanisms by which treatments may have their effect. In the proposed study, I will conduct an open-trial of CGT and will use intensive time-series data and recently- developed intra-individual network analyses to examine two plausible mechanisms of change by which CGT may have its effects: (a) a decoupling of the associations among CG symptoms and (b) propagating causal influence among CG symptoms in which reductions in symptoms central the CG network initiate a cascade of change that leads to reductions in overall CG severity. The findings from this study will identify mechanisms of change in CGT and, thereby, will allow for the development of new tools that better target those mechanisms as well as efforts to tailor interventions to target the processes most relevant to individual patients. In doing so, this study will pioneer a new method of examining and promoting change in psychotherapy for mental disorders.

2015 Grant Recipients

Jennifer Stevens, M.D.

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

Mentor: Bruce Landon, M.D., MBA

“Inpatient Specialist Consultation: Understanding Drivers of Variation and Hidden Resource Use”

Inpatient consultation is the process of involving specialists in the care of a hospitalized patient, something which happens every two seconds in the United States. Despite its prevalence, very little research has explored this common physician practice. Our long-term research objective is to describe the multiple drivers of variation in the use of inpatient consultation, to understand the patient- and system-level value of this widely used exposure, and to develop interventions to measure and improve the quality of inpatient consultation. Our prior work was the first step in this process and was the first large-scale description of consultation nationally among all Medicare patients. This research proposal represents the next step in this line of investigation. The overall goal of this proposal is to identify drivers to inpatient consultation with a focus on type of physician (e.g., hospitalist, primary care physician) and to quantify the downstream consequences of inpatient consultation. To pursue this goal, we propose two specific aims: (SA1) to identify sources of variation in inpatient consultation by quantifying the effect of hospitalists on the likelihood of inpatient consultation; and (SA2) to examine the impact of consultation on health care resource use following discharge. We will study these questions retrospectively among Medicare beneficiaries with medicine admissions to generalist physicians extracted from Medicare claims over a two-year period. We will employ the necessary hierarchical modeling techniques to address the complex relationships between patients, physicians, hospitals and region of the country and use propensity score analyses to accommodate inherent confounding by indication. Completion of this proposal will result in the first quantification of downstream consequences of specialty use in the hospital and identification of possible areas of under- and overuse of this hospital resource.

Sarinnapha Vasunilashorn, Ph.D.

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

Mentor: Edward R. Marcantonio, M.D., S.M.

“The Psychoneuroimmunology of Postoperative Delirium and its Associated Long-Term Cognitive and Functional Outcomes in Older Adults”

Delirium (an acute change in cognition) is common, morbid, and costly among hospitalized elders, yet our knowledge of its pathophysiology and its associated long-term cognitive and functional outcomes remain limited. Recently, an exciting neuroinflammatory model has emerged that addresses these gaps. In this model, individuals predisposed to a heightened inflammatory response when exposed to an acute stressor, such as surgery or infection, are at increased risk for delirium. These systemic inflammatory mediators may cross the blood brain barrier, result in neuroinflammation, which manifests as delirium, and may in-turn may lead to direct neuronal injury, with resulting long-term cognitive and functional consequences. Two biological mechanisms related to brain distress and neuropsychiatric disorders include the catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) gene and S100 β protein (S100 β). COMT, an enzyme that degrades catecholamines (stress hormones), is a key regulator of the stress response and has been associated with cognitive function. Elevated levels of S100 β , a glial-specific marker of neuronal injury, have been related to traumatic brain injury and stroke. Since COMT and

S100 β have been linked to several brain disorders, the same mechanisms may be important in delirium. This project will extend and elucidate current work surrounding these biological mechanisms of brain distress and neuropsychiatric disorders, including: the COMT gene and post-translational modification, and S100 β . I will use the Successful AGing after Elective Surgery Study of 566 non-demented adults age =70 who underwent major noncardiac surgery. My Specific Aims: 1) examine the relationship between COMT genotype and methylation, with postoperative inflammation and incidence of delirium, and 2) investigate the role of neuronal injury as a mediator of postoperative delirium and long-term outcomes. This work will advance the field by enhancing our understanding of the mechanisms of delirium by: elucidating whether genetic regulation of the stress response influences postoperative inflammation and delirium, and determining whether adverse long-term outcomes after delirium are attributed to direct neuronal injury. These findings may be used to identify patients at greatest risk for developing delirium, to assist with delirium monitoring and prognosis, and to develop interventional strategies to reduce the impact of this important geriatric syndrome that threatens independence in older adults.

2014 Grant Recipients

Noah Berman, Ph.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

Mentor: Sabine Wilhelm, Ph.D.

“Differential Effects of Positive and Negative Mood on OCD Treatment Response”

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a significantly impairing psychiatric illness that affects 2-3% of the population and is recognized as one of the ten leading causes of disability worldwide. Given the high prevalence, degree of impairment, and substantial financial burden, OCD is recognized as a major public health concern. Research aimed at better treating this debilitating disorder has increased over the past few decades, and exposure with response prevention (EXRP) has emerged as the most effective psychological treatment. However, a sizeable number of patients drop out of, or do not respond to, this intervention. Researchers have posited that the daunting nature of exposure-based therapy is a significant contributor to attrition and that patients' mood state can influence drop out, as well as the perceived acceptability and effectiveness of this intervention. No empirical work, however, has identified how mood affects EXRP. The present study therefore seeks to examine the mechanisms by which mood influences exposure-based treatment. Specifically, I aim to investigate how positive and negative mood states affect the interpretation of OCD-related stimuli and the subjective and physiologic habituation process following exposure.

To examine this research question, I will utilize a well-characterized sample of individuals with OCD. Following diagnostic interviews, participants will be randomly assigned to a sad, neutral (i.e., control), or positive mood induction. To maintain the effects of the mood induction, participants will then be administered an attention-training paradigm. To then assess how participants interpret idiosyncratic OCD-related stimuli, I will utilize self-report scales, pulse oximetry and facial electromyography (fEMG). Lastly, subjective and objective measures of habituation processes will be assessed in the context of a behavioral avoidance test (BAT). This multi-method study will provide pilot data for an NIMH Career Development award proposal, in which I will conduct a more comprehensive examination of how mood affects successful exposure-based therapy by investigating the interaction of psychosocial, neurobiological, and physiological factors. In identifying how mood states impact EXRP, I aim to reduce

the substantial public health impact and financial burden of OCD by tailoring interventions to improve the acceptability of exposure-based therapy and account for the affect of comorbid mood disorders.

Kathryn Papp, Ph.D.

Brigham and Women's Hospital

Mentor: Reisa A. Sperling, M.D.

“Using Semantic Memory to Differentiate Normal Aging from Preclinical Alzheimer's Disease”

Background: Alzheimer's disease (AD) and its precursor MCI (Mild Cognitive Impairment) are characterized by frank declines in episodic memory and semantic memory (i.e., memory for meaning, factual knowledge). Recently published guidelines suggest that subtle alterations in cognition may emerge prior to the stage of MCI, in clinically normal (CN) older adults. While episodic memory as it relates to AD-specific biomarkers has been extensively explored in CN older adults, semantic memory has been comparatively understudied. Famous face naming is an ecologically valid and useful semantic memory task that is sensitive to MCI/AD. But no studies, to our knowledge, have explored semantic memory using famous faces in CN adults in relation to AD-specific biomarkers.

Objective: The goal of this project is to determine if decrements in semantic memory are a marker specific to preclinical AD in CN older adults. Doing so may 1) provide a relevant outcome measure to be used in future clinical trials of disease-modifying drugs and 2) provide clinical guidelines for whether declines in semantic memory (the most common cognitive complaint of older patients) is a harbinger of AD.

Methods: We will administer a novel cognitive test of semantic memory entitled the Famous Face Association Test (FFAT) to 100 CN and early MCI older subjects participating in Harvard Aging Brain study. We will assess the relationship between the FFAT and traditional cognitive markers of episodic and semantic memory, amyloid burden, APOE epsilon4 gene status, and structural MRI volumetrics.

Aims and Hypotheses: Our first aim is to identify the psychometric properties of the FFAT and to investigate its relationship to other cognitive markers. We expect the FFAT to be reliable, exhibit good convergent and discriminant validity, and to be associated with episodic memory failure and memory complaints. Our second aim is to determine whether semantic memory decrements are associated with markers of preclinical AD. We expect poorer FFAT performance to be associated with biomarker evidence of increased risk for AD, including greater amyloid burden seen on brain imaging, greater genetic burden (greater number of APOE epsilon4 alleles), and decreased volume in brain areas important for memory (i.e., hippocampus).

2013 Grant Recipients

Jason Andrews, M.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

Mentor: Edward T. Ryan, M.D., DTM&H

“Evaluating Novel Diagnostic Strategies for Enteric Fever in Rural Nepal”

Every year, 21.6 million people worldwide develop typhoid, with the majority of cases and deaths occurring in South Asia. Serologic diagnostics have limited sensitivity and specificity, while the best available diagnostic--blood culture--is not available in rural, resource-limited settings due to lack of reliable electricity, laboratory infrastructure, and trained laboratory personnel. Working with colleagues at M.I.T., I designed a simple procedure to make culture-based diagnosis feasible without requiring these resources. I led the laboratory development of this procedure and a clinical validation study in urban Nepal that demonstrated excellent concordance with conventional blood cultures. In this research proposal, I detail a series of aims focused on improving diagnosis and treatment of typhoid in resource-limited settings through combining robust clinical prediction rules with this electricity-free culture-based diagnostic. I will do so by 1) applying advanced Bayesian statistical approaches to data generated from a careful study of typhoid among patients presenting with undifferentiated fever; 2) using the electricity-free culture procedure to obtain data on incidence of typhoid and drug-resistance among febrile patients presenting to rural Nepalese clinical settings; and 3) developing and populating a decision analytic, cost-effectiveness model for diagnosis and treatment of typhoid, using data generated from these clinical studies. Study sites for this research will include Patan Hospital, where we validated the innovative diagnostic, and Bayalpata Hospital, a rural Nepalese hospital where I have worked for the past five years. This research will be mentored by Dr. Edward T. Ryan, an expert in diagnosis of enteric diseases with a focus on South Asia, and Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, a leader in model-based analysis of cost-effectiveness for infectious diseases diagnostics. This work builds upon my training in epidemiology and modeling and will serve as a foundation for a K01 career development award focused on modeling, operations research and implementation science for enteric diseases diagnostics.

Kimberly Bertrand, Sc.D.

Brigham and Women's Hospital

Mentor: Rulla Tamimi, Sc.D.

“Adolescent Diet, Mammographic Density, and Breast Cancer Risk in Premenopausal Women”

Mammographic density is one of the strongest risk factors for breast cancer and is considered an intermediate marker of risk. We will conduct an epidemiologic investigation to study associations between adolescent diet, mammographic density, and breast cancer risk in premenopausal women. The specific aims of this project are:

1. To test the hypotheses that intakes of total energy, total fat, animal fat, and dairy fat as well as red meat and alcohol during adolescence are positively associated with mammographic density while intakes of carbohydrate, fiber, and vitamin D during adolescence are inversely associated with mammographic density in premenopausal women.
2. To evaluate whether associations observed between adolescent dietary risk factors and premenopausal mammographic density are modified by early life anthropometric characteristics.
3. To test the hypothesis that adjustment for premenopausal breast density accounts, at least in part, for associations between specific adolescent dietary factors and risk of breast cancer.

To address these aims, we will use the unique resources available in the Nurses' Health Study (NHS) II, a long-term follow-up study of premenopausal women. We collected screening mammograms from NHSII participants included in a nested case-control study of breast cancer. Percent breast density was assessed from mammograms using a computer-assisted method. High school dietary data were assessed by a food frequency questionnaire. Data will be available for approximately 967 cases and 1410 controls. We will use multiple linear regression, adjusting for potential confounders, to examine specific adolescent dietary risk factors in relation to average percent breast density among controls. We will also evaluate associations within subgroups defined by early life anthropometric characteristics (e.g., childhood/adolescent somatotype). Finally, we will quantitatively determine whether adolescent diet and premenopausal mammographic density are independently associated with breast cancer risk.

The proposed research will address critical gaps in current knowledge about the nutritional etiology of breast cancer. More importantly, dietary factors during adolescence are potentially modifiable determinants of risk. Identifying such novel risk factors will have a direct impact on prevention messages and future reductions in breast cancer incidence and mortality.

Andrea Enzinger, M.D.

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Mentor: Holly Prigerson, Ph.D.

“Characteristics of Effective End-of-Life Communication: Discussing Prognosis and Curability with Advanced Cancer Patients”

For patients with advanced incurable cancer, an accurate understanding of prognosis is fundamental to the ability to accept terminal illness and make appropriate plans at the end-of-life (EOL). Although most patients want accurate prognostic information, a large proportion of advanced cancer patients substantially overestimate their prognosis and inaccurately believe that palliative chemotherapy may cure their disease.

Gaps in communication likely contribute to patients' poor understanding of prognosis, curability and treatment intent, compromising informed decision-making, and contributing to overutilization of aggressive medical care near EOL. Research indicates substantial variability in how oncologists discuss prognosis and EOL medical care. These difficult topics are often discussed selectively, or with vague or euphemistic terminology to soften their emotional impact. Unfortunately, patients could easily misinterpret subtle or ambiguous prognostic messages. Research is needed to understand what communication approaches are most effective at improving patients' understanding of prognosis, curability, and the goals of palliative therapy.

We propose to analyze data from Coping with Cancer 2 (CwC2), an ongoing NCI-funded, multi-site, prospective cohort study, targeting enrollment of 400 patients with advanced metastatic cancer. As part of CwC2, clinic visits after a restaging scan are audiotaped, enabling study of conversations relating to disease progression, prognosis, and EOL planning. Pre- and post-visit surveys assess patients' understanding of curability, prognosis and treatment intent. We will analyze the content of audio-recorded visits (1) to determine the frequency and approach (e.g. direct versus vague) in which prognosis and curability are discussed, and (2) to determine communication elements that favorably impact patients' understanding of prognosis and curability. Secondly, we propose a cross-sectional study of 75 advanced cancer patients, employing semi-structured interviews to explore their perspectives regarding how effectively prognosis, curability, and treatment intent were communicated during their

initial oncology consultations. We will probe for specific phraseologies or communication approaches they perceived as particularly informative, or difficult to understand.

Our findings will inform future research in prognostic communication, including the development of a communication training intervention. Moreover, our findings have potential to enhance physicians' communication about prognosis and palliative treatment, improving the informed consent process, and supporting informed decision-making about palliative therapies at EOL.

2012 Grant Recipients

Dae Hyun Kim, M.D., M.P.H.

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

"Comparative Effectiveness of Self-Reported Information, Physical Performance Tests, and Noninvasive Measurements of Vascular Disease Burden in Predicting Persistent Disability in Aging Population"

Over 20% of older Americans report difficulty with at least 1 activity of daily living (ADL) and, in 2004, \$135 billion was spent to treat older adults with ADL impairments. Loss of independence (or dependence) in ADLs is an important patient-centered outcome, because it is 'the final common pathway' in aging and the disabling process that results from multiple disease conditions and is a strong predictor of institutionalizations, hospitalizations, and mortality. Therefore, early identification of individuals at risk for ADL dependence is a crucial first step to prevent disability and reduce healthcare costs.

Extensive research has identified a wide range of risk factors and elucidated causal pathways to ADL dependence, but the translation of scientific knowledge into clinical risk prediction has been slow. Our systematic review of the literature found that previous studies of risk factors for disability are limited by: different definitions of ADL disability; failure to consider the severity and duration of disability; lack of information on the optimal combination of previously identified risk factors for prediction; and the absence of comparison among different risk assessment methods, such as self-reported information, physical performance tests, or non-invasive measurements of subclinical disease burden, especially vascular disease.

Leading up to this proposed research, we have recently developed a simple model that uses self-reported information and brief cognitive assessment to predict the 5-year risk of persistent (more than 1 year) dependence with 3 or more ADLs in a large cohort of community-dwelling older adults. Building upon this research, we now propose to: 1) validate our prediction model in an independent dataset, the Cardiovascular Health Study; 2) examine whether our model also predicts other health outcomes, i.e., mortality and hospitalizations; and 3) compare our model with alternative prediction models that use physical performance tests (gait speed, repeated chair stands, and balance) or non-invasive measurements of vascular disease burden (electrocardiography, carotid ultrasound, and ankle-arm index).

In the end, we hope to disseminate a simple assessment tool for persistent ADL dependence and provide comparative evidence on different risk assessment tools. This research will help clinicians objectively assess patients' prognosis and make individualized long-term care plans.

Luke Stoeckel, Ph.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

"Self-Regulation of Brain Activation in Addiction"

Smoking-related illness causes over 440,000 deaths in the US and over 5 million deaths worldwide annually, and this figure is increasing. Although effective existing therapies double to triple cessation rates, relapse rates remain high. Up to 90% of people who quit smoking relapse within the first year, even with the best treatment available. Thus, we face a critical need to develop a better understanding of the neurobiological underpinnings of addictive processes, and of relapse in particular, in order to develop targeted relapse prevention therapies that help people to maintain abstinence. Most relapse occurs following smoking cue exposure. Tools now exist to evaluate individual patterns of abnormal cortical and subcortical brain reactivity to smoking cues in relapse prone smokers and to train people to modulate this abnormal smoking-related cue-associated brain reactivity with the aim of ameliorating disease-associated craving and compulsive urges. This revised project will test such a tool, real-time functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) neurofeedback used with emotion regulation strategies, as a novel approach to understanding and potentially modulating the neurobiology of addiction. This study is made possible by an ongoing collaboration between our research team at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) Center for Addiction Medicine, who have a track record of study of novel treatments for nicotine dependence, and Drs. John Gabrieli, Susan Whitfield-Gabrieli, and Ann Graybiel, a highly innovative and productive team of cognitive neuroscientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), who have pioneered this novel imaging technique. The proposed work has the potential to produce improved understanding of brain mechanisms underlying relapse and potentially, a novel therapy that could reduce the enormous morbidity and mortality caused by chronic, relapsing addiction to smoked tobacco, and also offers the potential for improved understanding and treatment of related disorders such as gambling and certain phenotypes of obesity that involve compulsive urges and failure of inhibitory control.

2011 Grant Recipients

David Chan, M.D., M.Sc.

Brigham and Women's Hospital

"Social Networks and Peer Effects among Emergency Department Physicians"

The notion that physicians can be socially incentivized by the presence of their peers is intuitive. However, to my knowledge, the nature of these "peer effects" among physicians has not previously been studied. My long-term objective is to study the effect of social networks on the behavior of individual physicians and on the overall productivity of health care organizations.

Specifically, I will evaluate the effects of emergency department physicians on each other as they work together. My specific aims are threefold. First, I will measure peer effects on individual productivity -- along dimensions of speed of care, quality of care, and teaching. I predict tradeoffs between more observable dimensions (e.g., speed of care) and less observable ones (e.g., quality of care), and I expect that peer effects will be stronger among more socially connected peers. Second, I will study peer effects on the choice of patients by physicians. Individual physicians may want to choose easy patients (i.e., "cherry pick"), but social networks may mitigate this by social pressure and appropriate coordination of work. Third, I will study the effect on overall emergency department productivity under a new system

that disallows physicians from choosing their own patients.

Two complementary features of my research design will allow us to accomplish my aims. First, I have detailed, longitudinal data on individual physicians and the patients that they see, involving sufficient variation in the teams of physicians working with each other. Second, my emergency department is undertaking a natural experiment in March of 2011 in which the rules of patient assignment will disallow physicians from choosing their own patients.

My research will shed light on how health care organizations should design their social networks implicit in team structures and the rules that govern behavior within teams. Specific implications include how organizations should match peers with each other, how transparent they should make productivity measures among peers at the expense of less transparent measures, and how much they should constrain implicitly social behaviors such as the choice of patients among physicians.

Peter Smulowitz, M.D., M.P.H.

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

"Massachusetts Health Reform and Emergency Department Utilization by Underserved Populations"

With the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010, the landscape of the US health system will change markedly. Similar to the ACA, the Massachusetts health reform legislation enacted in 2006 was designed to reduce the number of Massachusetts residents without health insurance.

One of the principal expected benefits of the Massachusetts legislation was that it would result in decreased utilization of Emergency Departments (EDs). However, ED use may be impacted by many factors aside from insurance status. The ED is used disproportionately by underserved populations without access to adequate primary care, many of whom are members of racial and ethnic minorities who lack insurance or are insured by the Medicaid program.

The proposed study will take advantage of comprehensive statewide data on ED utilization available in Massachusetts to study the impact of MA health reform on use of the ED. Thus, the results of this study will be an important guide to policy makers about the potential impact of health reform on ED utilization as the ACA is implemented across the nation.

Using data from the Massachusetts Division of Health Care Finance and Policy Acute Hospital Case Mix Databases from the years 2005 through 2010, we will examine the following specific aims:

Aim 1: To determine the impact of Massachusetts health care reform on ED utilization for low severity and ambulatory care sensitive visits using geographic variation (at the zip code level) in the percentage insured as our method of identification of changes resulting from health reform.

Aim 2: To estimate the effect of health reform on ED utilization by underserved populations -- defined by race and zip-code derived measures of socioeconomic status and social disorganization.

In order to accomplish these aims, we will utilize a validated algorithm to measure ED visit severity and a difference-in-differences analytic framework that will allow us to make causal inferences.

2010 Grant Recipients

Yee-Ming Chan, M.D., Ph.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

"Using Kisspeptin to Interrogate the Human GnRH Neuron in vivo"

The neuropeptide kisspeptin has recently been found to be a critical reproductive hormone. Kisspeptin activates the reproductive endocrine cascade by stimulating neurons in the hypothalamus to release gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH), which stimulates the pituitary gland to secrete luteinizing hormone (LH) and follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), which in turn stimulate the gonads to produce gametes and sex steroids (testosterone in men, estrogen in women). Kisspeptin is essential for human reproductive function, as mutations that disrupt the kisspeptin receptor cause idiopathic hypogonadotropic hypogonadism (IHH), a condition characterized by a failure to undergo normal puberty and consequent infertility.

Several groups (including ours) have identified a number of genetic mutations that underlie IHH. These studies have shown that IHH can result from the absence of GnRH neurons, or from a lack of upstream signals (such as kisspeptin) that are essential for normal GnRH secretion. However, for the ~75% of IHH patients who do not carry an identifiable mutation, it is not possible to determine which of these is the underlying mechanism; to date, there has been no method to probe the function of GnRH neurons in vivo. Because kisspeptin directly stimulates the GnRH neuron, exogenous administration of kisspeptin can now be used to assess GnRH neuronal function.

This project is a phase I/II clinical trial involving the administration of kisspeptin to human subjects, both healthy volunteers and individuals with IHH. Kisspeptin administration to healthy volunteers will reveal the precise effects of kisspeptin on GnRH secretion and will establish normal ranges for kisspeptin responses. Kisspeptin administration to IHH patients will be used to determine which of these patients retain functional GnRH neurons, a finding that may have prognostic implications.

These studies will allow us to characterize the pathophysiology of IHH and may also lead to the use of kisspeptin as diagnostic tool for other reproductive disorders, such as delayed puberty in adolescents. Furthermore, these studies are the first steps towards developing kisspeptin as a clinical treatment to stimulate or suppress the reproductive endocrine axis, with potential applications in the treatment of infertility, precocious puberty, and hormone-sensitive tumors such as breast cancer and prostate cancer.

Natalie Shaw, M.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

"Effect of Sleep Apnea on Nocturnal GnRH/LH Secretion in Children in Early Puberty"

The earliest physiological sign of puberty in both boys and girls is an augmentation of the pulsatile secretion of hypothalamic gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) and pituitary luteinizing hormone (LH). This augmentation initially occurs only during sleep. We hypothesize that the hypoxic episodes and arousals which disrupt sleep in children with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) will disrupt the nocturnal GnRH/LH secretory pattern of children with OSA in the early stages of puberty. Specifically,

we expect children with OSA in early puberty to have decreased LH pulse frequency and amplitude proportional to the severity of their sleep apnea.

To investigate this hypothesis, we will enroll 15 children in early puberty with OSA treated with a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine. Each child will undergo two studies consisting of a polysomnographic sleep study with simultaneous frequent blood sampling to detect LH pulses with or without CPAP in random order, such that each child serves as his own control, to determine whether LH pulse frequency and amplitude are decreased in the absence of CPAP. We will then investigate whether EEG arousals in the absence of hypoxia can produce a decrement in LH pulse frequency and amplitude. We will enroll another 15 children, and each child will undergo two polysomnographic sleep studies with frequent blood sampling. CPAP will be used in both studies during one of which auditory stimuli will be used to induce EEG arousals. The order of the studies will be randomized. These protocols will also allow us to analyze the connection between sleep stage and GnRH/LH pulses during puberty.

Given the high prevalence of OSA in children (1-4%), there is a potentially large population of children at risk for reproductive dysfunction in the form of failure to progress or delayed progression through puberty. These studies will allow us to define this risk as well as to provide greater insights into the basic physiology which ties GnRH/LH pulses to sleep.

2009 Grant Recipients

Stacey Kenfield, Sc.D., M.Sc.

Harvard School of Public Health

"Diet, Lifestyle, Biomarkers, and Prostate Cancer Survivorship"

Over 2 million men in the United States are prostate cancer (PCa) survivors. Many studies have examined dietary and lifestyle factors in relation to PCa incidence, but few have assessed their impact on PCa progression and survival. PCa has a very heterogeneous course; in some men, the disease rapidly progresses to metastases and death despite aggressive therapy, but in many, the course is indolent even with no treatment at all. Intriguing evidence suggests that diet and lifestyle after PCa diagnosis can affect prognosis. To address this important gap, I propose to evaluate three promising factors: fish intake, statin use, and physical activity and integrate these exposure data with biomarker data to explore relevant biologic pathways. These factors have been related to risk of advanced PCa, and have anti-angiogenic, anti-inflammatory, anti-proliferative, and pro-apoptotic effects, which may delay disease progression and improve survival. The specific aims are to examine the relation of PCa recurrence and mortality with: 1) high fish intake (both before and after diagnosis); 2) fish intake and markers of angiogenesis in the tumor tissue; 3) statin use and markers of angiogenesis, apoptosis, proliferation, and inflammation in the tumor tissue; and 4) high levels of physical activity (both before and after diagnosis). I will use data from approximately 3,500 participants in the Health Professionals Follow-up Study (HPFS) diagnosed with PCa who are followed every 2 years since diagnosis for recurrence outcomes. The HPFS is an ongoing prospective cohort study of 51,529 men that began in 1986, and dietary and other covariate data are collected every two to four years. Cox proportional hazards regression will be used to analyze the associations between diet and lifestyle factors and time to PCa recurrence and PCa-specific death. The findings from this research will be useful in determining whether these three promising factors may be beneficial for the growing population of men diagnosed with PCa; the biomarker analyses will determine potential mechanisms for those effects.

Angela Leung, M.D.

Boston University Medical Center

"Breast Milk Iodine and Perchlorate Concentrations: Effect on Infant Thyroid Function"

Context: Breastfed infants are reliant on maternal iodine for the production of thyroid hormones required for normal neurodevelopment. Recent studies have demonstrated a decrease in the dietary iodine intake of U.S. women of childbearing age. Environmental exposure to perchlorate, a competitive inhibitor of the sodium/iodide symporter (NIS), is ubiquitous in the U.S. Perchlorate exposure could potentially decrease NIS-mediated uptake of iodine into breast milk and infants' thyroid and could directly affect infant thyroid function. Thiocyanate, a byproduct of cigarette smoke and another inhibitor of NIS, may also decrease breast and thyroidal iodine utilization.

Objective: To cross-sectionally examine the relationships between iodine sufficiency of lactating women and their 1-2 month old infants, environmental perchlorate and cigarette smoke exposure, and infant thyroid function.

Participants: 275 healthy 1-2 month old breastfed infants and their lactating mothers in the Boston area.

Measurements: Concentrations of infant urinary iodine and perchlorate; infant serum TSH and free T4; maternal urinary iodine, perchlorate, and thiocyanate (as a marker for cigarette smoke exposure); and breast milk iodine, perchlorate, and thiocyanate.

Significance: The present proposal will be the first study to specifically examine relationships between iodine concentrations, perchlorate and cigarette smoking exposures, and thyroid function in breastfed infants. These data, far larger than any previous U.S. survey, will help to define adequate dietary iodine intake for breastfed infants and their mothers, and will also determine whether environmental perchlorate and cigarette smoking exposure have deleterious effects on infants' thyroid function.

2008 Grant Recipients

Kimmie Ng, M.D., M.P.H.

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

"Influence of the vitamin D pathway on survival in patients with colorectal cancer"

Nutritional therapies are the most common form of complementary therapy among cancer patients. A consensus panel of the American Cancer Society recommended, "Properly conducted studies of the effect of nutrition and physical activity on the prognosis of cancer survivors are urgently needed, and should be a high priority for all academic and research funding agencies." A growing body of evidence suggests that vitamin D inhibits growth of colorectal cancer cells and may improve the survival of patients with colorectal cancer. Using data from two large ongoing cohort studies, the Nurses' Health Study and the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study (160,000 participants), as well as a large, completed National Cancer Institute sponsored chemotherapy clinical trial in stage III colon cancer, we will examine the influence of various aspects of the vitamin D pathway on colorectal cancer patient outcomes. We will evaluate the relationship between plasma levels of 25 – hydroxyvitamin D [25(OH)D], the main form of vitamin D in the blood, and survival in colorectal cancer patients, as well as the association between a

predicted vitamin D score calculated from the main determinants of vitamin D status and patient survival. Moreover, we propose to investigate the impact of genetic variations in an important protein in the vitamin D pathway, the vitamin D receptor, as well as expression of the protein, on patient survival. Finally, interactions between patient blood levels of vitamin D and molecular factors within the tumors, such as K – ras mutations, will be explored. With the advantages of prospective longitudinal assessment of nutritional and lifestyle factors, paraffin – embedded tumor specimens to examine how vitamin D interacts with molecular alterations in tumors, prospectively collected blood and germline DNA specimens, and comprehensive data on cancer recurrence and mortality provided by these cohorts, we hope to further elucidate the role of the vitamin D pathway in colorectal cancer. Our results could potentially lead to a better understanding of the underlying biology of colorectal cancer, and to the identification of novel targets for therapeutic intervention.

Joshua Roffman, M.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

"Altered one-carbon metabolism in schizophrenia: molecular and neuroimaging correlates of folate response"

Schizophrenia is a devastating neuropsychiatric disorder affecting 1% of the population. Although certain schizophrenia symptoms can be managed with antipsychotic medications, there remain no good treatment options for the most debilitating aspects of the disorder-cognitive impairment and negative symptoms. These symptoms substantially disrupt social and occupational function, and inflict a terrible burden on affected patients, their family members, and society at large.

Up to 80% of an individual's risk for schizophrenia relates to genetic factors, although the effects of individual genes have been difficult to measure. We are using a variety of new, cross-disciplinary tools to magnify the signals of risk genes, by examining their effects on the levels of molecules, cells, and regional brain function in schizophrenia patients. Our work has focused on a promising candidate gene, MTHFR, that plays an important role in how the body processes folate. Folate is a B vitamin that comes from dietary sources, and deficiencies in folate have been tied to a variety of neuropsychiatric illnesses including schizophrenia. The MTHFR gene breaks down dietary folate into methyl groups, which influence the activity of genes that regulate brain chemistry. We are particularly interested in how the MTHFR gene influences the expression of a protein called COMT, which affects dopamine signaling in a part of the brain that has been consistently implicated in schizophrenia, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC).

We have shown that a common genetic variant in MTHFR increases the severity of negative symptoms and cognitive impairment in the disorder, and that these effects are worsened in patients with low folate intake. Using functional MRI scans, we have seen that the MTHFR gene also affects activity in the DLPFC during memory tasks in schizophrenia patients. The proposed research will determine whether MTHFR's effect on methyl groups and COMT expression drive its subsequent effects on DLPFC activity and cognitive impairment in schizophrenia. We will also determine whether treatment with folic acid helps to reverse the effects of MTHFR on COMT and DLPFC activity. These studies may provide vital insights into the genetic basis of schizophrenia, and will apply these insights directly to a promising new treatment for cognitive impairment.

2007 Grant Recipients

Mary Keebler, M.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

"Identification of Common DNA Sequence Variants Related to Blood Lipid Traits"

Jaime Murphy, M.D.

Boston University Medical Center

"Circulating Mesenchymal Precursors with Fibrogenic Potential in Asthma"

2006 Grant Recipients

Serena Mascieri, M.D.

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Prevalence of Germline E-Cadherin Mutations in Women with Lobular Breast Cancer

Maitreyi Mazumdar, M.D., M.P.H.

Children's Hospital Boston

"Health Insurance and Utilization of Services by Children with Epilepsy"

2005 Grant Recipients

Robert Ajemian, Ph.D.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"Dynamic Motor Learning in Alzheimer's Disease"

Jinbo Fan, Ph.D.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"Linkage Disequilibrium Mapping on Candidate Genes Across Chromosome 6q16-22 Bipolar Disorder Locus"

2004 Grant Recipients

Tina Huang, Ph.D.

Tufts University School of Medicine

"The Relationship of Fish and Essential Fatty Acids to Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease"

Sigall Kassutto, M.D.

Massachusetts General Hospital

"Predictors of Time to Virologic Suppression and Disease Progression after Initiation of Antiretroviral Therapy in Acute HIV-1 Infection"

Juliette C. Madan, M.D.

New England Medical Center

“Indomethacin Use for Closure of Patent Ductus Arteriosus in VLBW Infants: Association with Necrotizing Enterocolitis and Spontaneous Intestinal Perforation”

2003 Grant Recipients

Heike A. Bischoff, M.D., M.P.H.

Brigham and Women's Hospital

“Effects of Vitamin D&K on symptomatic Osteoarthritis of the Hip and Knee”

Richard E. Frye, M.D., Ph.D.

Children's Hospital Boston

“Developmental phonological dyslexia: Neural mechanisms”