



MIRECC Matters

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Letter from the Director

Alan S. Bellack, PhD, ABPP

This year, 2010, has been a bittersweet year for the VISN 5 MIRECC, with some key staff departures leavened with new hires and continued success for our investigators. Like Dwight Dickinson, PhD, the year before, Sarah Morris, PhD, resigned her position to take an exciting new job at National Institute of Health. Sarah was with us for 9-years and served as the Director of the VA Maryland Health Care System/University of Maryland Pre-doctoral Psychology Internship Consortium as well as a funded investigator, mentor for Fellows, and colleague. We will miss her

warmth and conviviality as well as her administrative and scientific talent. As this issue goes to press, Fran Broomall, our Administrative Assistant, will depart for retirement. We tried to convince her that she is too young to retire and that she is irreplaceable, but the lure of retirement was too strong. Fran has been at our front door since 2003 and has been the face of the MIRECC for all visitors to our suite. More importantly, she has also been a den mother, jack of all trades, unflinching helper, and consistent source of good cheer. Fran truly is irreplaceable, and we will sorely miss her. Paul Ruskin, MD, was another sad departure, albeit he has not left us entirely. Due to increasing responsibilities in VAMHCS Mental Health, Paul decided to step down as Director of the MIRECC Education Core this fall. He will continue to participate in our psychopharmacology consultation services but has given up his other roles. Paul has been the Education Core Director since we were established, and it will be difficult to get used to his absence. Needless to say, we wish Sarah, Fran and Paul the best of luck in their new ventures, and heartedly thank each of them for the contributions to our Center over the years.

The *sweet* part of our bittersweet year has come from several staff additions and new grants. In keeping with the successful MIRECC *farm system*, Richard Goldberg, PhD, has agreed to move from Director of the Clinical Core to Director of the Education Core. The Clinical and Education Cores have operated in a substantially integrated fashion for a number of years, so Richard is fully up to date with Education Core activities. This role is also a better fit for Richard's own interests and expertise. As part of this change, Richard will also take over the role of MIRECC Training Director from Alison Cernich, PhD. Alison, like Paul, has become progressively overcommitted and has also requested to step back from some of her responsibilities.

The *second* major change associated with this shuffling is that Seth Himelhoch, MD, MPH, has agreed to become Acting Clinical Core Director. Seth is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at University Maryland and has recently become an eighths employee of VA. He has been a colleague and collaborator in the Division of Services Research, and we had invited him to join our investigator cadre before the current management changes became necessary. Seth is Boarded in Psychiatry and Neurology with a sub-specialty in Psychosomatic Medicine. He is an expert on HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and telemedicine. He has had NIH R34 and a K23 grants, and is well-published. His work and personal style fit very well with

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Letter from the Director

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MIRECC and VA agendas.

There have been several other staff changes. Julie Kreyenbuhl, PhD, Pharm D, has been formally named as Assistant Director of the Research Core. A major aspect of her role will be to reorganize subject recruitment activities across studies to maximize coordination and efficiency. Julia Evely, MS, has been formally named as Director of Research Quality Management, a job she had been doing without the title since Shannon Thomas-Lohrman left. Jennifer Aakre, PhD, joined the MIRECC as a Post-doctoral Fellow this summer. She is working with me on a project related to adult consequences of childhood trauma. Two research assistants, Joseph Hassell and Kiara Vogel, departed during the year for a Post-doctoral Fellowship and graduate school, respectively. We recruited four new research staff for new projects. Julia Surow and Mary Brigid-Walsh are based at Perry Point VA, and Mathew Kendra and Viara Quiñones-Jackson are based in the DC VA.

Finally, as noted above, we have had continued success securing VA research grants. The following new awards were funded this year:

- *Assessing Recovery in People with Serious Mental Illness* (Alan Bellack: PI)
- *Randomized Trial of a Smoking Cessation Program for Persons with SMI* (Lisa Dixon: PI)
- *Genetics of Functional Disability in Schizophrenia and Bipolar Illness* (VA Cooperative Study #572: Gunvant Thaker: Site PI)
- *The VA Genomic Medicine Program: The Million Veteran Program* (VA Cooperative Study #G002: Gunvant Thaker: Site PI)

In addition, Amy Drapalski has received unofficial notice that her grant will be funded:

- *Reducing Internalized Stigma in People with Serious Mental Illness* (Amy Drapalski: PI)

Mental Illness: Stigma and the Family Conference Recap

Cindy Clark, RN, C

On Saturday, October 9, 2010, the 9th conference for Veterans with mental illness and their families took place at the Baltimore VA Medical Center Auditorium. The focus of the half-day conference, *Mental Illness: Stigma and the Family*, was on the effects of stigma on Veterans and their families. Alicia Lucksted, PhD, presented on the various definitions of stigma, on the effects of stigma, and on successful coping mechanisms to manage harmful effects of stigma. Amy Drapalski, PhD, discussed the impact of stigma on families as well as a number of helpful coping skills for families to use when dealing with the effects of stigma. Following the speakers, a panel of Veterans and family members shared their personal experiences with stigma and their recovery journeys. After the conference, attendees enjoyed lunch in the cafeteria and were provided literature on support resources in the VA and the community. Approximately 50 Veterans and their family members attended the conference. The conference was presented by the VISN 5 MIRECC and clinical staff at the Baltimore VA Medical Center.

VISN 5 MIRECC Staff Present at Various National Conferences

In the past two months, VISN 5 MIRECC staff participated and presented at various conferences. Jennifer Aakre, PhD, and Monica Mann-Wrobel, PhD, attended the 2nd Annual Mental Health Fellows Research Institute at the VA Advanced Fellowship Program Hub Site located at the Palo Alto VA Medical Center and Stanford University on October 14-18. This conference brought together MIRECC fellows from 23 sites around the country. Fellows attended talks on career development, grant development, statistics, and translational research. This conference was designed to augment weekly didactic seminars organized by the Hub Site for the Fellowship Program. Drs. Aakre and Mann-Wrobel presented their research ideas to peers and selected faculty, received valuable feedback on these **presentations, and learned about other fellows' research interests.** Specifically, Dr. Aakre presented her preliminary ideas on the development of an intervention for posttraumatic stress disorder in individuals with serious mental illness, and Dr. Mann-Wrobel presented on a study idea involving the use of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for serious mental illness.

Seth Himelhoch, MD, MPH, and Rebecca Pasillas, PhD, presented at the 44th Annual Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) Convention in San Francisco, California, on November 18-21. Dr. Himelhoch and colleagues from University of Maryland, Baltimore, and Northwestern University presented on the feasibility and outcomes of telephone based cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) targeting major depression among urban dwelling African-Americans with co-occurring HIV. Their paper was part of ABCT's poster session program focusing on CBT. Dr. Pasillas and colleagues from the VA Caribbean Healthcare System in San Juan, Puerto Rico, presented on adapting Social Skills Training for Spanish-speaking Veterans with serious mental illness. Their presentation was

one of the many posters selected by Hispanic Issues in Behavior Therapy Special Interest Group presented during the Special Interest Group Exposition. As it has been the tradition for the past two years, Dr. Pasillas participated in **ABCT's "Postdoctoral Meet and Greet" to promote and advertise the VA Interprofessional Fellowship Program in Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery to prospective applicants.**

Dr. Pasillas also attended the 2010 Biennial National Latino/a Psychological Association Convention in San Antonio, Texas, on November 11-13. She chaired a symposium with Laurel Kiser, PhD, University of Maryland School of Medicine, and colleagues from University of California at **San Francisco and DePelchin Children's Center in Houston, Texas.** The symposium focused on adapting a multi-family trauma group treatment, Strengthening Family Coping Resources (SFCR), for use with Latino families. SFCR is a promising family trauma treatment that uses a multi-family group format to deliver a trauma-focused, skills-based treatment to urban, low-income families. Presenters described SFCR and its empirically-supported components of effective trauma treatment, the challenges and lessons learned from applying SFCR with a group of families that differed in language, acculturation levels, and cultural values, and the adaptation process, including modifications made to SFCR for use with Latino families.

For additional information about the presentations described above, contact:

Jennifer Aakre, PhD, at Jennifer.Aakre@va.gov

Seth Himelhoch, MD, MPH at shimelho@psych.umaryland.edu

Monica Mann-Wrobel, PhD, at Monica.Mann-Wrobel@va.gov

Rebecca Pasillas, PhD, at Rebecca.Pasillas@va.gov

Farewell and Good Luck

Sarah Morris, Ph.D., recently left the MIRECC for a position as Program Officer for the Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorders Research Program in the Division of Adult Translational Research at the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Morris arrived at the MIRECC as a post-doctoral fellow in 2001 and joined the faculty at the School of Medicine in 2003. She received two VA research grants and served as a co-investigator on other grant-funded studies at the VA and University of Maryland School of Medicine. Her research focused on studies of reward, learning and self-monitoring in schizophrenia. She also served as Director of Training for the VAMHCS/UM Psychology Internship Consortium since 2008 and as director of the MIRECC Post-doctoral Fellowship in Psychology.

Upcoming Events

MONTHLY CONSULTATION SEMINAR

First Thursday of every month: November 4 and December 2, 2010

1:00 - 2:00 PM

MIRECC conference room, 6th floor, Suite 6A

or call 1-800-767-1750, code 79846

Psychopharmacology Case Conference: **All VISN Clinicians are invited to attend** this conference and to bring questions about a difficult or challenging psychopharmacology case. Note that the topic of the conference has been expanded from a focus only on metabolic side effects of antipsychotic medications to include all areas of psychopharmacology. The MIRECC Case Conference facilitators are Robert Buchanan, MD, MIRECC investigator and Professor of Psychiatry at the UMB School of Medicine; Julie Kreyenbuhl, PharmD, PhD, MIRECC investigator and Associate Professor in the UMB Department of Psychiatry; Neil Sandson, MD, inpatient attending psychiatrist in the VAMHCS and MIRECC staff member.

RECOVERY-ORIENTED SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM

Application Deadlines for 2010 & 2011: 1st of March, June, September, & December

Small Grant Amount: \$300-\$5000

The VISN 5 MIRECC offers a small grant mechanism to fund recovery-oriented clinical and educational innovations in response to the VA's Action Agenda to transform VA mental health services to a recovery model. This program especially encourages (but is not limited to) proposals such as: creating, adopting, launching or expanding recovery-oriented clinical or self-help projects, new programs to educate staff, Veterans, and/or family members of Veterans about mental health recovery models, or specific recovery-oriented services/programs. For more information or to receive an application, please contact:

Alicia Lucksted, PhD

MIRECC Recovery Coordinator

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Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov

VA SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS

March 15-16, 2011

Baltimore, MD

The VISN 5 MIRECC is training staff on the delivery of Social Skills Training for Veterans with schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses (schizoaffective, bipolar, and treatment refractory depression). This is a national initiative being led by the Office of Mental Health Services. Individuals in all VISNs are invited to participate. For this training initiative, only clinicians working with Veterans with SMI (as defined above) are asked to apply. Please direct all questions and application requests, including upcoming workshop dates, to:

Matthew Wiley, MPH

VA Social Skills Training Program Coordinator

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