Research Collaborations at the Atlanta VA

Research Resources 101

Research Collaboration Opportunities at the VA

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Disclosures

• Mike Hart:
  – is a full-time VA staff physician
  – has a dual appointment at Emory University
  – has worked in VA hospitals >35 years
  – started his research career with a VA Career Development Award

• I am an advocate for the VA system

Audience Questions

• Why are you here?

• Why do you want to know more about the VA?

• Have you ever been to the Atlanta VA?
Objectives

• Develop a better understanding of the Atlanta VA and its relationship with Emory University;

• Describe the VA Research Program, what type of funding mechanisms are available, and who is eligible to apply;

• Learn more about areas of existing research at the Atlanta VA that might provide opportunities for collaboration.

Why are Emory and the VA affiliated?

• The history

• Legislation to create formal affiliations between the nation’s medical schools and VA Hospitals

• **VA benefits** from medical faculty providing and supervising patient care in VA hospitals

• **Academic affiliates benefit** from
  — VA support for medical education
  — Access to patients and training facilities
  — Ability to perform research

VA – the largest integrated healthcare system in the country

• Serves 8.76 million veterans per year

• VA Employees: 347,883

• VA Hospitals: 150

• VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinics: 819

• > 60% of medical residents train in a VA facility
Changes in VA
“It’s not your father’s VA”

PAST
• Patients
• Expectations
• Customer Service
• Innovation

PRESENT

VA Missions
Look familiar?

Missions
• Clinical
• Research – intramural vs extramural
• Education

VA – much more than research

Mission
Honor America’s Veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being.
The Atlanta VA

- One of fastest growing VA facilities in the country
  - Unique patients: ~94,000 (increasing at ~9%/yr)
  - Outpatient visits > 1 million

- Tertiary Complexity IA facility
  - capable of caring for the most complex cases
  - 273 med/surg beds
  - Magnet designation for Nursing Excellence
  - 15 Community-based Outpatient Centers (CBOCs)

- Affiliates – Emory and Morehouse (more soon)
  - VA provides 184 FTE training positions
  - >90% of the staff physicians at the Atlanta VA have Emory faculty appointments

Atlanta VA Research Statistics

- >400 active projects
- 140 Principal Investigators
- >500 personnel participating in Research
- 39 Merit Review Awards / 14 CDA Awards
- 7 VA Research Career Scientists
- 60,000 sq ft research space

Atlanta VA Research Program Highlights

- Rehabilitation R&D Center of Excellence (Center for Visual and Neurocognitive Repair)
- Clinical Studies Center
- B’ham/Atlanta Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center (GRECC)
- Million Veteran Program Site
- Outstanding Academic Affiliates / Partners
  - Emory, Morehouse, Georgia Tech, and Georgia State
  - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Research Collaborations at the Atlanta VA

4 Services in VA Research

- **BUR&D (Biomedical and Laboratories)**: Explores basic biological or physiological mechanisms in humans or animals but does not involve intact human beings. Includes research on animal models and investigations of tissues, fluids, or cell cultures from humans.
- **CSR&D (Clinical Sciences)**: Research that focuses on intact human beings in the context of examination, includes interventional and observational studies, clinical, epidemiological and technological studies.
- **HSR&D (Health Services)**: Research at the interface of health care systems, patients and health care outcomes. HSR&D emphasizes all aspects of VA health care, including quality, access, patient outcomes and health care costs.
- **RR&D (Rehabilitation)**: Dedicated to the well-being of America’s veterans through a full spectrum of research from approved rehabilitation research projects, evaluation and technology transfer to final clinical application.

Rehab Center of Excellence

Center for Visual and Neurocognitive Rehabilitation

- **Visual Rehabilitation** - targets rehabilitation of visually impaired veterans.
- **Neurocognitive Rehabilitation** - focuses on age-related neurocognitive changes.
- **Retinal and Neural Repair** - explores the mechanistic basis of visual and neurocognitive rehab.
  - Dr. Machelle Pardue
  - Dr. Madeleine Hackney
  - Dr. Bruce Crosson
  - Beneficial Effects of Exercise on Retinal Degeneration
  - Adapted Tango to Improve Posture and Balance in Patients with Parkinson’s Disease

Center of Excellence

Clinical Trials Pipeline

Each project will progress along the clinical pipeline from the laboratory to the community.

Center of Excellence for visual and neurocognitive rehabilitation
Example of Success in BLR&D
Raymond F. Schinazi PhD
• Senior VA Research Career Scientist (29 years)
• >480 peer-reviewed papers
• Known for innovative and pioneering work on antiviral medications
• Four of these drugs are FDA approved
• >90% of HIV-infected individuals take at least one of the drugs he invented

CSR&D: Clinical Studies Center
Unique unit with dedicated space for:
➢ research nurses/coordinators
➢ subject outpatient visits
➢ sample processing / storage / sendout
➢ Provides assistance with
  - investigator development, study design
  - human studies analysis
  - clinical research training
  - compliance / quality assurance

HSR&D: Health Services Research
• Examines how we deliver care and ways to improve that care
• Currently pursuing strategic initiative to expand Health Services Research
• Robust databases available through VA for research
NATIONAL VA RESEARCH HISTORY OF CONTRIBUTIONS

- Advances in:
  - spinal cord injury,
  - amputation care,
  - prosthetics,
  - blind rehabilitation,
  - aging,
  - women’s health,
  - AIDS,
  - Agent Orange exposure,
  - post-traumatic stress disorder
  - mental health

- VA researchers played key roles in:
  - developing the cardiac pacemaker, the CT scan, radioimmunoassay, and improvements in artificial limbs.
  - the world’s first liver transplant in the was performed by a VA surgeon-researcher.
  - clinical trials establishing the effectiveness of new treatments for tuberculosis, schizophrenia and high blood pressure.

- VA investigators have won 3 Nobel Prizes (two in 1977 and one in 1998) and 7 Lasker Awards.


VA Research Funding

The Basics

http://www.atlanta.va.gov/services/research
Programmatic Research Categories of Interest to VA

- Afghanistan & Iraq Veterans
- Alzheimer's Disease
- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)
- Cardiac Disease
- Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM)
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Gastrointestinal Health
- Gastroenteritis
- Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses
- Health Care Delivery
- Health Care Disparities
- Hearing Loss
- Hepatitis C
- Homelessness
- Infectious Disease
- Kidney Disease
- Mental Health
- Obesity
- Parkinson's Disease
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Propionibacteria
- Respiratory Health
- Rural Health
- Sexual Health
- Substance Use Disorders
- Suicide Prevention
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- Vietnam Veterans
- Vision Loss
- Women's Health

Funding Mechanisms

- Career Development Award
- Merit Review Award
- (Senior) Research Career Scientist

VA Research Proposals - General

- Use SF424 and eRA Commons
- Most programs have 2 submission cycles per year:
  - Fall (September) and spring (Feb), OR
  - winter (December) and summer (June)
- Applications submitted to VA Research office
  - Require review (2 peer reviewers) and approval by VA R&D Cmte before being submitted to Central Office
VA Career Development Awards

- Career Development Awards (CDA)
  - CDA-2 predominant award
    - open to MD and PhD candidates - developed to attract, train, and retain investigators in the VA system
    - specify career development plans and research project (relevant to veterans health) over a 3-5 year duration
    - Most services require citizenship
    - Non-clinicians must be ≥ 5 years beyond degree (e.g., PhD)
    - Clinicians must be ≥ 5 years past their last clinical training (e.g., clinical fellowship) and ≤ 10 years past MD
    - Requires a Letter of Intent (LOI) and at least one VA-funded mentor
    - Budget covers salary for PI (up to 75% for MD and more for PhD), and up to $50k/year in research support.

VA Merit Review Award

- Major investigator-initiated funding mechanism
- Merit Review applications similar to R01 application
  - Aims page
  - 12-page research strategy
  - Bioketch, Facilities, Environment, etc all similar to NIH
  - not intended to fund the entire research program of a senior investigator
  - work needs to be conducted at VA unless justified need for partial off-site work
  - relevance to veterans health important
  - reviewed by VA study sections using Grants.gov / eRA Commons for application management
  - funding percentiles historically in 20-25% range have been decreasing in past few years and now in 15-20% range

(Senior) research career scientist (S/RCS) awards

- a career track for the non-clinician Ph.D. scientist
- RCS and SRCS are conferred to non-clinician scientists by appointment in recognition of outstanding achievements and contributions to VA research
- provides salary support from BLR&D or CSR&D for the term of the award and is renewable: 5 years for RCS, 7 years for SRCS
- Requires concurrent Merit Review funding
- Highly competitive
PhD “Eligibility”

- acceptance into the BL-CS RD non-clinician intramural research program is granted for three years
- required that individuals accepted into the intramural program will conduct their research at the VA Medical Center, participate in the administration of the local research service, and be available for national service, such as service on VA merit review panels
- Applicants:
  - Must be US citizen
  - address how applicant will add to research and contribute to VA’s programmatic interests including the training of VA clinician-scientists
  - Once approved enables applicant to apply for Merit Review funding

Review considerations

- VA Research Program smaller than NIH therefore less study section diversity
- Investigators can still submit original application plus 2 revised applications

Atlanta Research and Education Foundation (AREF)

- VA Affiliated Non Profit Corporation
  - Goal to facilitate VA research and education
    - www.atlaref.org
  - $8 Million in revenues
- POC Leslie Henry
  Executive Director
  Leslie@atlaref.org
Want to review ongoing research projects at Atlanta VA?

- Visit homepage of the Atlanta Research and Education Foundation (http://www.atlaref.org)
  
  - Go to the “Search” link on the top right of the page
  
  - Search current Atlanta VA investigators by name for a brief description of their research programs, OR
  
  - Search by research topic to determine who at ATL VA is working in a specific area

Useful information

- Atlanta VA Research website: www.atlanta.va.gov/research

- Contacts in Atlanta VA Research Office:
  
  - David Knight, Science Information Officer, David.Knight2@va.gov
  
  - Tony Laracuente, MBA – Director of Research Operations, antonio.laracuente03@va.gov
  
  - Mike Hart, MD – Associate Chief of Staff for Research, michael.hart3@va.gov
  
  - Stuart Zola, PhD – Deputy, Assoc Chief of Staff Res, szola@emory.edu