



Joel Kupersmith, MD

## **Discovery and Collaboration for Exceptional Health Care: Research Week 2011 celebrates research progress through partnership**

This year's Research Week (May 2–6, 2011) continues a long-standing annual tradition of both celebrating the achievements of exceptional Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) researchers and paying tribute to Veterans who generously volunteer to participate in VA studies. Dating back to 1995, Research Week has spotlighted the vital contributions of VA investigators to medical understanding and patient care. This year's dual-pronged theme, "Discovery and Collaboration for Exceptional Health Care," also paid special tribute to VA's eminent partners, including the academic affiliates nationwide that collaborate with VA and our invaluable Federal partners such as the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Defense.

VA continually joins forces with others steadfastly committed to improving the health of Veterans and all Americans. These partnerships magnify the research impact of VA's world-class intramural research program. This means that breakthrough findings come faster and are more swiftly translated into life-improving therapies.

VA-academic joint efforts have augmented VA's capabilities in health research, as well as education and training, for 65 years, since the historic document known as Policy Memorandum No. 2 partnered VA with the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).

These collaborations have become increasingly critical with the increasing sophistication of medical research and the ever-growing complexity of Veterans' healthcare needs. Such healthcare challenges include injuries that are often combat-related, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and spinal cord injury, and chronic illnesses, such as heart disease and cancer.

Much of the world's leading research on these conditions is done by investigators who are dually affiliated with VA and a partner university. At the Center for Restorative and Regenerative Medicine, for example, a large multidisciplinary team representing the Providence VA Medical Center (VAMC), Brown University, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology applies their combined expertise in areas such as bionics, tissue engineering, and nanotechnology to advance healthcare and rehabilitation for Veterans. Among other successes, their work has resulted in a commercially available robotic foot-ankle prosthesis offered to Veterans and Active Duty personnel. Other studies focus on the BrainGate, a remarkable technology that shows promise as an upper-limb prosthetic control system and as a means of enabling patients with paralysis to accomplish various tasks—such as controlling a computer cursor—solely through their thoughts.

Research Week was a time to laud VA researchers for their fantastic progress in these areas and many more, with exciting events held at VA Central Office (VACO) and other VACO facilities across the country. On May 5, 2011, VACO hosted its annual Research Forum, with a packed schedule of distinguished speakers on VA research. Among the leaders with whom I had the honor of sharing the stage were VA Chief of Staff John R. Gingrich; and VA Deputy Secretary for Health for Policy and Services Madhulika Agarwal, MD, MPH.

Other distinguished guest speakers included—

- Ann C. Bonham, PhD, AAMC Chief Scientific Officer, presenting the illustrious history of VA-academic partnerships.
- Colonel Greg Gadson, U.S. Army Wounded Warrior Program Director, speaking about the committed teamwork among Federal Government agencies.
- E. Albert Reece, MD, PhD, MBA, Vice President for Medical Affairs and Dean of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, presenting a university perspective on VA-academic joint efforts.
- Gregg Zoroya, *USA Today* reporter, speaking from a beat writer's perspective about war's health consequences and other effects.
- Stephen Cochran, U.S. Marine Corps Veteran and country music singer-songwriter, moderating a panel of Veterans discussing their participation in VA research.

The Research Forum audience was also treated to compelling presentations by three research pioneers associated with VA and renowned partner institutions—

- Mingxiong Huang, PhD. Dr. Huang is a leader in the field of imaging and its use in brain disorders.
- Maren Scheuner, MD. Genetics expert Dr. Scheuner specializes in health services and policy research to help incorporate genomics technologies into clinical medicine.
- Rory Cooper, PhD. Dr. Cooper, founder and current director of the Human Engineering Research Laboratories, which includes a VA Center of Excellence, has set his sights on restoring function to Veterans with spinal cord injuries.

During a Congressional reception on the eve of our Research Forum, trailblazing physician-investigator Richard F. Macko, MD, was recognized for having recently received the Paul B. Magnuson Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rehabilitation Research and Development (RR&D) Service. Dr. Macko, Director of the RR&D Center of Excellence in Exercise and Robotics and Associate Director of Research for the Baltimore Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Center, earned the 2010 Magnuson Award for his impressive body of work. As stated in the award plaque citation, he was selected, "In recognition of his dedication to the care of Veterans with disabilities; his work at the VA Maryland Healthcare System, Baltimore VA Medical Center; his efforts to enhance the quality of life of stroke patients and the care for all Veterans; and his dedication to VA Rehabilitation Research."

Presentations during the Research Forum spotlighted many more dramatic research introductions made by VA researchers and their colleagues. Additional Research Forum highlights included—

- Million Veteran Program (MVP) National Launch. The nationwide expansion of the MVP was announced, an unprecedented VA-Veteran partnership to build a genetic database to uncover gene-health associations.
- Veteran Service Organization (VSO) Lunch. The VSO-sponsored event gave audience members and presenters a valuable opportunity for further discussion in an informal setting.

Meanwhile, VAMCs nationwide recognized their own world-class healthcare researchers and prized partners in research through open houses, research displays and slide shows, and Veteran-appreciation programs. Coast-to-coast, highly regarded investigators, including 2010 Magnuson Award winner Dr. Macko, spoke at their local institutions about groundbreaking VA research.

We are proud of the broad participation in Research Week 2011 and look forward to another successful celebration next year. For more information about Research Week 2011 events as it becomes available, along with postings about previous years' activities, please visit <http://www.research.va.gov/researchweek>.

**Joel Kupersmith, MD**

VA Chief Research and Development Officer,  
Washington, DC

Email: [Joel.Kupersmith@va.gov](mailto:Joel.Kupersmith@va.gov)

This article and any supplementary material should  
be cited as follows:

Kupersmith J. Discovery and Collaboration for Excep-

tional Health Care: Research Week 2011 celebrates  
research progress through partnership. *J Rehabil Res  
Dev.* 2011;48(5): xi-ivx.

DOI:10.1682/JRRD.2011.05.0084







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