

MIRECC Matters

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Meet the New MIRECC Investigators

Three investigators recently joined the VISN 5 MIRECC team: Alison Cernich, PhD, Seth Himelhoch, MD, MPH, and Bernard Fischer, MD.

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Alison Cernich, PhD, completed her PhD in Clinical Psychology at Fairleigh Dickinson University. After completing her pre-doctoral internship at the Baltimore VAMC, she completed a two-year post-doctoral fellowship in neuropsychology at National Rehabilitation Hospital's cognitive neuroscience program. Dr. Cernich serves as the Director of the Neuropsychology Service for the VAMHCS, Program Manager for the Polytrauma Support Clinic Team, and recently took on the role of Psychology Fellowship Director for the MIRECC.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. CERNICH

What responsibilities will you have with the MIRECC?

I will serve as the Post-Doctoral Fellowship Director for the psychology fellows and will also help to develop new research in the area of traumatic brain injury and PTSD.

What is your area of research?

The primary focus of my research work is the use of exercise as a rehabilitation intervention for individuals with brain-related disorders. I have a VA Career Development Award to support my work investigating the effect of aerobic exercise on neurocognition in patients with hemiparetic stroke. The project is in conjunction with the Maryland Exercise and Robotics Center of Excellence, directed by Dr. Richard Macko.

What studies do you currently have in progress?

My Career Development Award focuses on the assessment of

cognition before and after an exercise intervention using neuropsychological assessment, fMRI tasks, and a motor learning paradigm. I am interested not only in the long-term effect of the intervention but have pilot projects underway to examine the effect of an acute bout of exercise in these patients and the effect of exercise on dual-task walking paradigms. Similar projects are being developed in Parkinson's disease in collaboration with the University of Maryland Movement Disorders Center and for mild Traumatic Brain Injury in conjunction with the VAMHCS Neurology Department. My other pilot study is to demonstrate the effectiveness of sip and puff technology to assess cognition via computer with tetraplegic patients in conjunction with Dr. Henry York at Kernan Rehabilitation Hospital. I also continue to work with the Depleted Uranium (DU) Clinical Health Monitoring Program which is a clinical program that follows individuals exposed to DU armaments during their time of service in the Gulf Conflicts or OEF-OIF.

Dr. Cernich, continued

What are the potential benefits of your research?

This line of research has the potential to change attitudes about the use of exercise as a long-term intervention for individuals with disabilities. Exercise is a low-cost intervention that has primary benefits for health and secondary benefits for these individuals' cognitive status, level of activity, and sense of efficacy. It is imperative to track and quantify these outcomes as they are associated with functional abilities and community involvement.

Why were you interested in this area of research when you started?

I have always had an interest in rehabilitation following injury or diagnosis of illness due to the lack of efficacious medications and the desire in many of these individuals to return to their "normal" level of function. When I attended Neurology Grand Rounds and heard about Dr. Macko's exercise research and saw his data regarding gait improvements and corresponding brain changes in individuals with chronic hemiparetic stroke following a treadmill exercise program, I wanted to be involved.

Who had the greatest influence on your choosing this area?

My clinical patients had the greatest influence on me. I routinely work with people who are traumatically injured, or have a stroke, or are diagnosed with diseases that affect their brain. This not only affects their health, but all aspects of their lives. Almost all of them continually strive

to get better despite the fact that they may have completed medical rehabilitation. It's inspiring to me the way that they independently pursue wellness and work so hard to complete routine tasks that I take for granted.

How can someone get in touch with you if they're interested in your work?

I can be reached via email at Alison.Cernich@va.gov, or 410-605-7408.

"My clinical patients had the greatest influence on me. It's inspiring to me the way that they independently pursue wellness and work so hard to complete routine tasks that I take for granted."

Meet the New MIRECC Researchers

Seth Himelhoch, MD, MPH, is a psychiatrist and Associate Professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in the Department of Psychiatry. He currently serves as the Director of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services at the **UM School of Medicine’s Infectious Diseases Clinic**. He is board certified in general psychiatry and psychosomatic medicine and is a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. Dr. Himelhoch received his medical degree from the University of Michigan School of Medicine and completed his residency training in



general psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco. From 2001-2003 he was a Fellow in the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine where he concurrently received a Masters Degree in Public Health. **Dr. Himelhoch’s clinical and research experiences have** focused on access to care and treatment of co-occurring psychiatric and drug use disorders among individuals with HIV. He is actively involved in the clinical and research supervision of both psychiatry residents, fellows and psychology interns.

Look for an in-depth interview with Dr. Himelhoch in the next issue of MIRECC Matters.

Bernard Fischer, MD, joins the MIRECC part-time following his faculty appointment at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. His research interests include psychotic disorders and substance abuse. Dr. Fischer received his medical degree from the Medical College of Virginia and completed a combined clinical/research residency in psychiatry at the University of Maryland/Sheppard Pratt. He recently completed an NIH-sponsored schizophrenia research

fellowship at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center where his work focused on research ethics and magnetic resonance spectroscopy. Dr. Fischer will be developing the MIRECC research program in post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.



The MIRECC at USPRA

The VISN 5 MIRECC contributed to the success of the recent US Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (USPRA) Annual Training Conference held in Norfolk, Virginia. Conference organizers estimated that one-third of the 900 attendees (consumers, rehabilitation specialists and other service providers, researchers, administrators, and advocates) worked within and/or were receiving services from the VA system. To showcase the innovative programs and projects being implemented in the VA, the conference

included a Department of Veterans Affairs Innovation Fair. The MIRECC was represented in several ways. One poster highlighted the Psychosocial Rehabilitation Training Program, which to date has provided training, technical support, and consultation in evidence-based psychosocial interventions to over 170 practitioners working with seriously mentally ill veterans and their families. Another poster showcased

the seven training sites included in the VA Interprofessional Fellowship Program in Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Oriented Services. Richard Goldberg, PhD, Director of the MIRECC Clinical Core, Hub-site Director for the VA Fellowship Program, and a member of the USPRA National Research Committee, was our representative at the Innovations Fair and helped staff the program evaluation consultation booth.

Welcome to New Staff

Monica Mann-Wrobel, PhD, joins the MIRECC as a Post-Doctoral Fellow after having received her doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the University of Maryland and completing an internship at the Baltimore VA/University of Maryland Internship Consortium. Dr. Mann-Wrobel worked in Dr. Sarah Morris' psychophysiology lab at the VA and completed her dissertation study as part of this work. Prior to studying in Maryland, she received her BA in Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where her research interests were the neurobiological and clinical risk factors for the development of schizophrenia.

Good-bye and Good Luck

Wendy Tenhula, PhD, recently left the MIRECC for a position as the Senior Liaison/Consultant for Psychological Health between VA Central Office and the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. Dr. Tenhula had been the Coordinator of the VISN 5 MIRECC since 2000, shortly after the MIRECC was funded. She received two VA research grants and served as a co-investigator on several other grant-funded studies at the VA and University of Maryland School of Medicine. During her tenure at the MIRECC, she was instrumental in developing the Points Incentive Program (PIP) on 364A at the Perry Point VAMC, planned numerous MIRECC conferences, supervised psychology interns and was the Director of the MIRECC Post-doctoral Fellowship in Psychology. Dr. Tenhula played a significant role in the growth and success of the MIRECC and will be missed.

Jason Peer, PhD, left the MIRECC for a Clinical Psychologist appointment with the VA at Perry Point where he will be serving as the staff psychologist for the Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center. Dr. Peer joined the MIRECC in 2006 as a post-doctoral fellow shortly after completing his internship in Clinical Psychology in the VAMHCS/UM School of Medicine Consortium. He was involved in several MIRECC projects such as the Maryland Program for Vocational Effectiveness and the development of a focused smoking cessation intervention for serious mental illness. He was also part of the Psychosocial Evidence Review Group involved in updating the Schizophrenia PORT recommendations. We are grateful for his service and wish him much success in his new position.

Upcoming Events



MONTHLY SGA CONSULTATION SEMINAR

First Thursday of every month:
September 3, 2009 & October 1, 2009
1:00 - 2:00 PM
MIRECC conference room, BVA (6A-168)
or PPVA VTel conference room, Bldg 364 (C-110)
or call 800-767-1750, code 79846

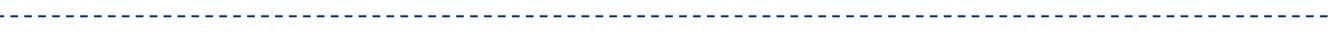
Psychopharmacology Case Conference: Clinicians are invited to bring questions about a difficult or challenging psychopharmacology case, or to just attend to listen. Case Conference leaders are Robert Buchanan, MD, MIRECC investigator and Professor of Psychiatry at the UMB School of Medicine; Julie Kreyenbuhl, PharmD, PhD, MIRECC investigator and Assistant Professor in the UMB Department of Psychiatry, and Neil Sandson, MD, inpatient attending psychiatrist in the VAMHCS and MIRECC staff member.



RECOVERY-ORIENTED SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM

Application Deadline: September 1, 2009

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, at Alicia.Lucksted@va.gov, 410-706-3244.



Stigma - The Enemy Within Us

Thursday, October 8, 2009
8:00 AM - 4:00 PM
Baltimore VA Medical Center Auditorium

In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Week, VISN 5 MIRECC and the VAMHCS Mental Health Clinic Center are presenting a one-day conference focused on the impact of stigma associated with mental illness. The conference will inform VA employees, veterans, family members and the general public of the concept of stigma and self-stigma, how they affect the veteran and their recovery, and potential strategies for eliminating stigma. The conference will include speakers, break-out sessions, and veteran panels that will discuss stigma from a veteran, family, and global perspective.

For more information, please contact Karen Wilson, Recovery Coordinator, at 410-605-7355 or karen.wilson2@va.gov.

