Director's Update

Twenty years ago, Dr. Thomas Horvath (Horvath, 2001) described the promise of the MIRECCs “as a transforming agent” of our VISNs and VA. With our distinctive, specific missions, collaborative structure, emphasis on science, evidence, local, regional and national Stakeholder voices, and above all the mental health needs of Veterans and their families, the MIRECCs have indeed been a “transforming agent.” For example, the work of our Mid-Atlantic MIRECC is establishing a greater understanding of the challenges affecting Veterans with PTSD, traumatic brain injury, suicide risk, sleep problems, and chronic pain. And this work is accomplished all within the context of the ongoing social and environmental realities that Veterans, families and providers of mental health services confront every day.

Now, we are again facing a big challenge – a resurgence of COVID-19 infections. With new variants and the global nature of the pandemic, we are confronting a crisis that will be continuing, with potential new challenges in the coming months. Nonetheless, we keep working to improve the lives of Veterans facing big challenges related to mental health, disparities, inequities and all that this conveys in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My suggestion is to continue to do what we always have done: Work collaboratively, rely on all voices, and strengthen our commitment to high-quality research and evidence-based training and education, recognizing the need to adapt and grow as we learn more about what Veterans need and where gaps exist in this era of COVID-19. Let’s continue to help where needed, remembering to share our experience and knowledge about where good changes can be made to meet the mental health needs of Veterans and their families.

Reference

Horvath, T. (2001). A time for reflection in the MIRECCs: Setting the standards. National MIRECC Education Group Newsletter, Department of Veterans Affairs. (Read more)
The Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) in Durham published the results of their qualitative exit interviews from the RRD-funded pilot study of supervised exercise in older Veterans with PTSD. This was a collaborative piece amongst our GRECC, MIRECC, and HSRD colleagues, in which the lead author was Dr. Julia Browne (above), a new Advance GRECC Fellow. In addition, Dr. Katherine S. Hall (below), Associate Professor in Medicine (GRECC), served as the senior author and Principle Investigator. To read more about the study, click here.

In 2019, the Duke University School of Medicine published an article relating to the study that focused on the “Warrior Wellness for Older Veterans with PTSD.” Today, a subsequent larger clinical trial stemming from this pilot study is now underway and recruiting patients. The trial is called “Warrior Wellness” and will compare six months of Supervised Group Exercise versus a Health Aging Education on PTSD symptoms and physical functioning in older Veterans with PTSD.

Dr. James (Trey) Bateman (previous MIRECC Fellow, and current Staff Behavioral Neurologist at Salisbury VAMC) was announced the winner of the 2021 Lina Mae Edwards Young Investigator Research Grants, and will be awarded $100,000 for his project titled “Autonomic Biomarkers of Mild Behavioral Impairment in ADRD.” To read more about the research, click here.

At VISN 6 MIRECC we are genuinely committed to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at varied organizational levels. Thus, a new DEI task force has been formed to start compiling the views and ideas that will lead to a thoughtful DEI statement for our new website. Drs. Cindy Swinkels (MIRECC’s Co-Associate Director of Clinical and Wilfredo López-Ojeda (MIRECC’s Assistant Director of Education), are leading this group effort among other participants.

The Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) in Durham published the results of their qualitative exit interviews from the RRD-funded pilot study of supervised exercise in older Veterans with PTSD. This was a collaborative piece amongst our GRECC, MIRECC, and HSRD colleagues, in which the lead author was Dr. Julia Browne (above), a new Advance GRECC Fellow. In addition, Dr. Katherine S. Hall (below), Associate Professor in Medicine (GRECC), served as the senior author and Principle Investigator. To read more about the study, click here.

In 2019, the Duke University School of Medicine published an article relating to the study that focused on the “Warrior Wellness for Older Veterans with PTSD.” Today, a subsequent larger clinical trial stemming from this pilot study is now underway and recruiting patients. The trial is called “Warrior Wellness” and will compare six months of Supervised Group Exercise versus a Health Aging Education on PTSD symptoms and physical functioning in older Veterans with PTSD.

Dr. James (Trey) Bateman (previous MIRECC Fellow, and current Staff Behavioral Neurologist at Salisbury VAMC) was announced the winner of the 2021 Lina Mae Edwards Young Investigator Research Grants, and will be awarded $100,000 for his project titled “Autonomic Biomarkers of Mild Behavioral Impairment in ADRD.” To read more about the research, click here.

At VISN 6 MIRECC we are genuinely committed to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at varied organizational levels. Thus, a new DEI task force has been formed to start compiling the views and ideas that will lead to a thoughtful DEI statement for our new website. Drs. Cindy Swinkels (MIRECC’s Co-Associate Director of Clinical and Wilfredo López-Ojeda (MIRECC’s Assistant Director of Education), are leading this group effort among other participants.

FOCUS ON THE VISN

MID-ATLANTIC MIRECC UPDATE

In the News

The Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center (GRECC) in Durham published the results of their qualitative exit interviews from the RRD-funded pilot study of supervised exercise in older Veterans with PTSD. This was a collaborative piece amongst our GRECC, MIRECC, and HSRD colleagues, in which the lead author was Dr. Julia Browne (above), a new Advance GRECC Fellow. In addition, Dr. Katherine S. Hall (below), Associate Professor in Medicine (GRECC), served as the senior author and Principle Investigator. To read more about the study, click here.

In 2019, the Duke University School of Medicine published an article relating to the study that focused on the “Warrior Wellness for Older Veterans with PTSD.” Today, a subsequent larger clinical trial stemming from this pilot study is now underway and recruiting patients. The trial is called “Warrior Wellness” and will compare six months of Supervised Group Exercise versus a Health Aging Education on PTSD symptoms and physical functioning in older Veterans with PTSD.

Dr. James (Trey) Bateman (previous MIRECC Fellow, and current Staff Behavioral Neurologist at Salisbury VAMC) was announced the winner of the 2021 Lina Mae Edwards Young Investigator Research Grants, and will be awarded $100,000 for his project titled “Autonomic Biomarkers of Mild Behavioral Impairment in ADRD.” To read more about the research, click here.

At VISN 6 MIRECC we are genuinely committed to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at varied organizational levels. Thus, a new DEI task force has been formed to start compiling the views and ideas that will lead to a thoughtful DEI statement for our new website. Drs. Cindy Swinkels (MIRECC’s Co-Associate Director of Clinical and Wilfredo López-Ojeda (MIRECC’s Assistant Director of Education), are leading this group effort among other participants.

Education and Dissemination

Invited Lectures & Presentations


López-Ojeda, W. Human Plastinates Technology for Medical Training and Education. Wake Forest School of Medicine, Department of Undergraduate Medical Education. July 27, 2021. Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC.


Research Presentations


Poster Presentations


FOCUS ON THE VISN

MID-ATLANTIC MIRECC UPDATE

Technology & Innovation

On July 29, the VA Medical Center (VAMC) in Kernersville hosted an Extended Reality (XR) Neuroanatomy demonstration. Touch of Life Technologies (ToTtech), among others (Varjo, Lenovo) supported the hardware, software, and other devices for this amazing XR demonstration featuring ToTtech’s integrated systems for medical education and clinical care. The field of medical innovations is rapidly evolving into the fascinating world of virtual reality technology and its subcategories (i.e., augmented reality, mixed reality). Dr. Wilfredo López-Ojeda (MIRECC’s Asst. Director of Education), and ToTTech’s Anatomy Team (Laura Weinkle, Jake Shearer and Tom Chelston) led by Greg Spitzer (CEO) delivered a riveting and engaging remote-learning demonstration for our MIRECC leadership team, including Drs. John Fairbank (Director), Jennifer Naylor (Deputy Director) and Robin Hurley (Associate Dir. of Education). Research and medical education participants from Wake Forest School of Medicine, Salisbury and Kernersville VAMC joined the hands-on active learning demonstration and participated in the virtual activities using one of the latest XR technology systems in the market.

Program Updates

On June 15, Integrative Mental Health (formerly Mental Health and Chaplaincy) hosted a special presentation on Collaborative Moral Injury Care. IMH welcomed two guest presenters: Dr. Pat Pernicano and Chaplain Kerry Haynes of the South Texas VA Healthcare System. This team presented their 4-week moral injury psychoeducation curriculum, which was developed as part of their quality improvement work in IMH’s Dynamic Diffusion Network, and for which they were awarded a Clinical Education Grant from the South Central MIRECC. IMH also announced a new Moral Injury Consultation program that is open to all mental health providers and chaplains who are interested in moral injury, with emphasis on moral injury conceptualization, collaborative care, and practice development. Consultation requests can be initiated by emailing moralinjuryconsult@va.gov.

Education and Dissemination

Transitions

Dr. Cindy Swinkels, MIRECC’s Co-Associate Director of Clinical, is now the Acting VISN 6 Evidence Based Practice Subject Matter Expert. She will provide support to the VISN Chief Mental Health Office, Dr. David Buyck and the seven facilities within the VISN 6 catchment. She will help promote EBP training and provide coordination between facilities and the National EBP Program office.

Dr. Anna Ord (MIRECC’s Postdoctoral Fellow, Salisbury site) completed her two-year program in June 2021 and has accepted a position at Regent University, her Alma Mater, as the Department Chair for the Department of Graduate Psychology. Her new role will include teaching and providing training to graduate students in Psychology.

New Hires

Anna Fink, BA, is the new Program Assistant with Integrative Mental Health. She is a graduate of Duke University with a major in Psychology and a minor in Cultural Anthropology and French Studies.

To develop, disseminate and apply scientific knowledge and best practices to enhance post-deployment mental health and wellness for our Nation’s Veterans and their families.
Publications


Bjork, JM., Reisweber, J., Burchett, JR., Plonski, PE., Konova, AB., Lopez-Guzman, S., Dismuke-Greer, CE. (July 30, 2021). Impulsivity and Medical Care Utilization in Veterans Treated for Substance Use Disorder. Journal of Subst Use Misuse. (Read more)

Blakey, SM., Tsai, J., & Elbogen, EB. (March 17, 2021). Drinking to cope with posttraumatic stress: A nationally representative study of men with and without military combat experience. Journal of Dual Diagnosis. (Read more)


Elbogen, EB., Lanier, M., Blakey, SM., Wagner, HR., & Tsai, J. (May 5, 2021). Suicidal ideation and thoughts of self-harm during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of COVID-related stress, social isolation, and financial strain. Depression and Anxiety. (Read more)


Rothman, DJ., McDonald, SD., Walker, WC., & Feldman, G. (July 13, 2021). Olfactory changes after military deployment are associated with emotional distress but not with mTBI history. American Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. (Read more)

Shura, RD., Armistead-Jehle, P., Rowland, JA., Taber, KH., & Cooper, DB. (June 17, 2021). Self-Reported Neurobehavioral Symptoms in Combat Veterans: An examination of NSI with mBIAS symptom validity scales and potential effects of psychological distress. Psychological Assessment. Advanced online publication. (Read more)


Wells, SY., Walter, KH., Strasshoffer, D., Schnitzer, JS., Dedert, EA., Thorp, SR., Morland LA., Glassman, LH. Do older veterans experience change in posttraumatic cognitions following prolonged exposure therapy and relaxation therapy? (In press)
Visit Self-help resources to obtain education and support information for Veterans, friends and family members who may be facing mental health challenges. VA specialists have assembled a short list of reviewer’s recommended materials that may be helpful in finding the most appropriate information for you. We have a new education pamphlet on Moral Injury (MI), click here.

Please click on each resource topic for more information.

- General Mental Health
- Depression & Anxiety
- PTSD
- Substance Use Disorder (SUD)

For additional help, click "How to Use."

**ONLINE LIFE TRAINING SKILLS FOR VETERANS**

There are several free and anonymous on-line education and life coaching programs that use interactive exercises and video demonstrations to teach skills for overcoming life challenges. For more information, click here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moving Forward</th>
<th>Veteran Parenting</th>
<th>Anger Management</th>
<th>Path to Better Sleep</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS**

The DMVA Resource Guide is produced and published by the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to assist and educate Veterans in learning about state and federal veteran benefits.

The 2020 edition is now available. View or Download by clicking here.

**RESOURCES FOR VETERANS & FAMILIES**

PROVIDER EDUCATION

PACERS is an education program for health care staff who care for Veterans with cognitive disorders and their caregivers. While this program targets rural health care staff, providers working in any setting can benefit from this information.

The PACERS online training curriculum includes six e-learning courses; each course is accredited for 1 hour of continuing education. There are also 5 videos that cover important topics related to cognitive impairment, including driving, self-neglect, challenging behaviors, Alzheimer’s disease, and end-of-life.

**VA Providers:** Take courses using TMS links

**Non-VA Providers:** Use TRAIN links

**Course 1:** Driving and Demential-Hanging up the Keys.
**Course 2:** How to Deliver the Diagnosis of Alzheimer’s Disease.
**Course 3:** How to Have an End of Life Discussion.
**Course 4:** How to Identify Self-Neglect.
**Course 5:** Addressing Decision Making and Safety in Dementia.

VISIT PACERS for links to each course.

**UPCOMING HSR&D CYBERVERSEMINARS**

**UPCOMING WEBINARS FOR NATIONAL CBOC MENTAL HEALTH GRAND ROUNDS**

**September 8 & 10:** Eating Disorders (9am-10am EST).

**October 13 & 14:** MST and Courage Group (9-10am EST).

**November 17 & 18:** Ethics and Adjusting to Post-Pandemic Life (9am-10am EST).

For direct links to webinars, click here.
RESEARCH SITES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Durham VAMC
Rita M. Davison
rita.davison@va.gov
919-384-8582 ext 4022

Richmond VAMC
Torran Claiborne
torran.claiborne@va.gov
804-675-5000 ext 4251

Salisbury VAMC
Mary Peoples
mary.peoples1@va.gov
704-638-9000 ext 12956

Leonard DeShield
MIRECC Communications Specialist
leonard.deshield@va.gov
704-638-9000 ext. 12959

CLICK THE BANNER TO VISIT OUR WEBSITE

Stay Up to Date on Mid-Atlantic MIRECC
Contact (leonard.deshield@va.gov) to ensure you're on the mailing list to receive copies of our newsletter.

Next Issue: December 2021