



*A monthly newsletter dedicated to informing and strengthening the VA Research Community - August 2021*

## Message from the CRADO

Dear VA Research Community,

In 1941, twenty-year-old [Rosalyn Yalow](#) entered the graduate program in physics at the University of Illinois at Urbana. She was the only woman among 400 faculty and teaching assistants, and one of only three Jewish people there.



Years later, doing research at the Bronx VA hospital, Dr. Yalow would go on to earn a Nobel Prize for developing radioimmunoassay.

What a powerful lesson in the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The world has come a long way since the 1940s, but we still have much work to do in ensuring these core values are upheld in every sector of society. This holds true for our own VA research community, as it does for most medical research settings in the U.S. today. The percentage of minority VA-funded principal investigators is far lower than what it needs to be, and we are working to change that.

VA's overall [Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan](#) for fiscal year 2021 clearly states the benefits of diversity and inclusion for the agency and those we serve:

*Diversity is one of the defining strengths of America and the diversity of our workforce is one of our greatest strengths in accomplishing the Department's missions. Diversity fosters innovative solutions to some of our most challenging issues and enhances decision making by providing a broader range of perspectives and interpretations. ... A diverse and inclusive culture is strongly linked to VA's core values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence (I CARE).*

The Office of Research and Development formed a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Working Group (DEI-WG) in 2020 to affirm and strengthen our commitment to these values, and to bring about tangible advancements on this front within the VA research community. The group's mission is as follows:



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- Develop a diverse scientific workforce through training and funding opportunities.
- Stimulate research focused on minority health and reducing health disparities.
- Promote a culture of inclusion in our workplace and scientific activities that will enhance the quality of our work and increase its relevance to the Veterans, VA scientific research, and the clinical communities we serve.

This mission is foundational to the VA Research enterprise. Among the qualities we aim to cultivate through the enterprise is “engaged people.” We define this as “diverse staff, researchers, and communities, who feel a sense of belonging, empowerment, and unified purpose to improve Veterans’ well-being.”

I am proud of the work our DEI-WG has accomplished so far to promote this goal. One example is ORD’s recent funding of [diversity supplements](#) for 10 early-career investigators from groups that are under-represented in health research. These outstanding scientists will be mentored by established VA-funded investigators and will help improve our understanding of how to prevent, diagnose, and treat PTSD, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, heart disease, substance use disorders, and other conditions common among Veterans.

We will be standing up a web page in the next few weeks where you will be able to read more about the progress and accomplishments of the DEI-WG.

We are also pursuing the goal of representation and equality in other areas of VA Research, such as pushing to enroll more women Veterans in MVP. It is important to ensure that we conduct research that will be of benefit to all Veterans.

I am thrilled that we, as a community, are in the forefront of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in health research. I am excited about what the future holds, and I deeply appreciate our shared commitment to this vital mission.

Sincerely,

Rachel

**Rachel Ramoni, DMD, ScD**  
**Chief Research and Development Officer (14RD)**  
**Department of Veterans Affairs**



**Policy/Admin Updates**

**All research sites now onboard with IRBNet**—All VA research sites nationwide, as well as the VA Central IRB, have now been transitioned to the IRBNet platform. The move harmonizes and standardizes regulatory review across the VA Research system.

The change is a major step in the evolution of VA Research into an enterprise, with uniform processes across all sites. The unified platform provides a cohesive system for all VAMC research operations. It generates one authoritative enterprise research dataset to give ORD a comprehensive overview of all nationwide activity at any point in time.

**VAIRRS Wizard Completion Campaign**—The deadline for study teams to complete the Project Cover Sheet and IRB Information Sheet Wizards for all active projects is before **Dec. 15, 2021**. Please submit your Wizards as soon as possible. The Wizards are located on each study team's project page on [gov.IRBNet.org](http://gov.IRBNet.org).

**Update on the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM)**—The ORD Strategic Initiative for Research & EHR Synergy (OSIRES) is working with the [Office of EHRM](#) and Cerner to provide enterprise level and site-specific support for research's transition to VA's new electronic health record, Cerner Millennium.

- Millennium has been deployed at the Mann-Grandstaff VAMC in Spokane, Washington, since October 24, 2020.
- To improve the EHR implementation process, VA has completed a [strategic review](#) of the EHRM program, and leaders have been working to determine next steps for the deployment of the new EHR. In the meantime, the VA secretary has committed to no additional site deployments in calendar year 2021. EHRM deployment preparation and local workshops are continuing at VISN 20 and VISN 10 medical centers.
- OSIRES' [EHRM and research](#) page of the *Research Resource Guide* maintains information about the EHRM, its impact on research, and ORD-sponsored activity related to the transition, as well as links to additional information and resources. Information specific to EHR data can be found on VIREC's web page, [EHRM & Implications for Data Users](#).
- Contact the OSIRES HelpDesk, [ResearchEHRMHelp@VA.gov](mailto:ResearchEHRMHelp@VA.gov), with questions or concerns.



## Resources and Opportunities

**Million Veteran Program women's campaign**—MVP is in its final weeks of their [national MVP women's campaign](#) to increase participation of women in the program. Please help spread the word to women Veterans by:

- Printing and sharing MVP's [one-pager](#) with women Veterans in your studies, when/if appropriate.
- Referring women patients in your clinical care to enroll in MVP, when/if appropriate, using [this text](#) to copy/paste into patient instructions.
- Including MVP's campaign materials in any research outreach events.

All materials are available for download in the [MVP women's campaign toolkit](#). If your facility has an MVP clinic (see the list of enrollment sites [here](#)), your local MVP Coordinator can assist with outreach and printing of materials. If your facility does not have an MVP clinic, you can still share materials and encourage women Veterans to enroll online at [mvp.va.gov](http://mvp.va.gov).

Additionally, MVP's campaign has been featured in a series of podcasts, blogs, media stories, and PSAs—all linked [here](#) in the toolkit. Be sure to also check out these powerful [testimonial videos](#) of VA women leaders who enrolled in MVP and encourage others to join them.

For any questions, comments or suggestions, please contact [Claudia Gutierrez](#) or [Jennifer Deen](#). Thank you for all you have already done and for your continued support!

**Dr. Robert L. Jesse Award for Excellence in Innovation**—Nominations for the Under Secretary for Health Robert L. Jesse Award for Excellence in Innovation are now open for VA employees. Established in 2019, this award program recognized outstanding VHA employees who have demonstrated excellence and enabled the discovery and expanse of health care innovation that exceeds expectations, restores hope, and builds trust within the Veteran community.

This year, the award will honor three selected recipients—a non-clinical employee, a clinical employee, and a team or department. The awards will be presented at this year's [VHA Innovation Experience](#), and the winners will receive a one-time cash award. Nominations should be submitted on [VA LEAF](#) by **Aug. 20, 2021**. Questions regarding the award process should be directed to the VA Innovation Support Team at [VAInnovation@atlasresearch.us](mailto:VAInnovation@atlasresearch.us).

**2021 VHA Innovation Experience Virtual Series**—[Registration is now open](#) for the 2021 VHA Innovation Experience iEX Virtual Series. The first virtual event is **Aug. 26-27, 2021**. This year's iEX is a four-part event that provides attendees an opportunity to experience and celebrate how VHA innovation, collaboration, and technology are breaking boundaries, forging the future of Veteran health care, and most importantly, changing and saving Veteran lives and reshaping the face of health care across the nation.

# 2021 VHA INNOVATION EXPERIENCE VIRTUAL SERIES

▶ **PITCH COMPETITION**

August 26, 2021 | 1:00 – 4:00 pm ET

Breaking Boundaries: Collaboration Challenge

▶ **PANEL SESSION**

August 27, 2021 | 2:00 – 3:30 pm ET

Breaking Boundaries: Co-Designing for Tomorrow

▶ **PANEL SESSION**

September 15, 2021 | 2:00 – 3:00 pm ET

Forging a Healthier Future: Post-Pandemic Care

▶ **PANEL SESSION**

October 13, 2021 | 2:00 – 3:00 pm ET

Breaking Boundaries:  
Using Innovation to Advance Health Equity

▶ **MARQUEE EVENT**

October 27-28, 2021 | 12:00 – 5:00 pm ET

iEX CONFERENCE

Breaking Boundaries:  
Forging a Healthier Future for All Veterans

Through expert panels, a new pitch competition, and hallmark conference sessions like iEX Talks and the VHA Shark Tank Competition, iEX will allow participants to interact with some of the nation's premier innovators and thought leaders from government, industry, and academia.

**ORD developing a national research registry for all VA research**—ORD is in the beginning stages of creating a centralized research registry, designed to help find the study participants you need and better connect Veterans with the innovative, cutting-edge care we're so proud to offer at VA. The registry will ultimately supplement your existing recruitment strategies, not replace them, as a tool for reaching out to interested volunteers.

Your input is critical to getting it right. We want to hear your insights and any specific requirements you feel are important to a national volunteer registry. Additionally, we ask that **local registries not be created** in order to avoid duplicating efforts and potentially confusing Veterans when a national registry launches.

If you have ideas to share or questions about this initiative, please contact [research@va.gov](mailto:research@va.gov). We look forward to hearing from you!

## Employment

- (08/04/21) [Biological Science Laboratory Technician \(Animal\)](#)- Bay Pines, FL
- (08/04/21) [Supervisory Budget Analyst](#)- Durham, NC
- (08/02/21) [Health Science Officer - Director of Artificial Intelligence](#)- Washington, DC
- (07/26/21) [Biostatistician](#)- Hines, IL

More VA Research opportunities can be seen on the [ORD website](#). Members of the VA Research community who are interested in advertising their available positions here can submit requests to [ORD.Web@va.gov](mailto:ORD.Web@va.gov).



## Noteworthy Publications

Below is a small sampling of noteworthy studies published by VA researchers within the past month. This list is intended to reflect the broad spectrum of VA research, but is in no way inclusive of all VA researcher topics or projects. Visit the [VACO Library](#) website to sign up for alerts on published VA studies on many different topics.

[Association between administration of IL-6 antagonists and mortality among patients hospitalized for COVID-19: A meta-analysis](#). Shankar-Hari M, Vale CL, Godolphin PJ, Fisher D, Higgins JP, Spiga F, Savovic J et al. Administration of IL-6 antagonist, compared with usual care or placebo, was associated with lower 28-day all-cause mortality from COVID-19. JAMA. 2021 July 6. Online ahead of print.

[Pregnant women with substance use disorders – The harm associated with punitive approaches](#). Haffajee RL, Faherty LJ, Zivin K. Punishing pregnant women with substance use disorders has been ineffective; it's time to prioritize approaches that support pregnant women and their families. New England Journal of Medicine. 2021 Jun 24;384(25):2364-2367.

[Use of medications for treatment of opioid use disorder among US Medicaid enrollees in 11 states, 2014-2018](#). Donohue JM, Jarlenski MP, Kim JY, Tang L, Ahrens K, Allen L, Austin A et al. Among U.S. Medicaid enrollees in 11 states, the prevalence of medication use for treatment of opioid use disorder increased from 2014 through 2018. JAMA. 2021 Jul 13;326(2):154-164.

[Body-mass index and diabetes risk in 57 low-income and middle-income countries: A cross-sectional study of nationally representative, individual-level data in 685,612 adults](#). Teufel F, Seiglie JA, Geldsetzer P, Theilmann M, Marcus ME, Ebert C, Lopez Arboleda WA. The association between BMI and diabetes risk in low-income and middle-income countries is subject to substantial regional variability. Diabetes risk is greater at lower BMI thresholds and at younger ages than reflected in currently used BMI cutoffs for assessing diabetes risk. Lancet. 2021 Jul 17;398(10296):238-248.

[Effect of 7 vs 14 days of antibiotic therapy on resolution of symptoms among afebrile men with urinary tract infection: A randomized clinical trial](#). Drekonja DM, Trautner B, Amundson C, Kuskowski M, Johnson JR. Among men with suspected UTI, treatment with antibiotics for seven days was noninferior to 14 days of treatment for symptom resolution. JAMA. 2021 Jul 27;326(4):324-331.



## Media Buzz

### Social Media Highlights

On July 11, the main VA Twitter account tweeted to its over 600,000 followers about CSR&D director Dr. Terri Gleason's interview on Federal Drive with Tom Temin.



**Veterans Affairs** @DeptVetAffairs · Jul 11

To give a sense of the range of work going on with PTSD, the Director for Clinical Science Research and Development in VA's Office of Research and Development Dr. Terri Gleason, spoke to Federal Drive with Tom Temin.



The VA never stops its search for treatments for PTSD | Federal News N...  
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is one of those maladies that affects everyone differently and remains beyond any single cure.  
[federalnewsnetwork.com](https://www.federalnewsnetwork.com)



On July 25, VA tweeted about a Healthcast podcast from *GovernmentCIO* discussing the Million Veteran Program.



**Veterans Affairs** ✓ @DeptVetAffairs · Jul 25



The Veterans Affairs Million Veteran Program (MVP) is using genomic information submitted by American veterans to conduct research on a wide array of physical and mental health conditions. Hear how VA is using this critical research:



On July 1, VA Women's Health featured Jenn Deen as their guest on a new episode of their Veteran-facing podcast called *She Wears the Boots*: <https://www.spreaker.com/user/11014928/womenshealth-deen-mvp-052721-edits-06252>.

If you would like to submit a post to go on the VA Research Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram pages, please do so via email at [ORDMedia@va.gov](mailto:ORDMedia@va.gov).

Please include the following information:

- Desired platform: Facebook, Twitter (240 character max), or Instagram
- Post content
- Image
- Link

After the above are submitted, the request will be forwarded to the ORD Communications team for approval and scheduling. Posts may also be added to a library of potential stories to be picked up by other VA social media accounts, such as the main VA pages.

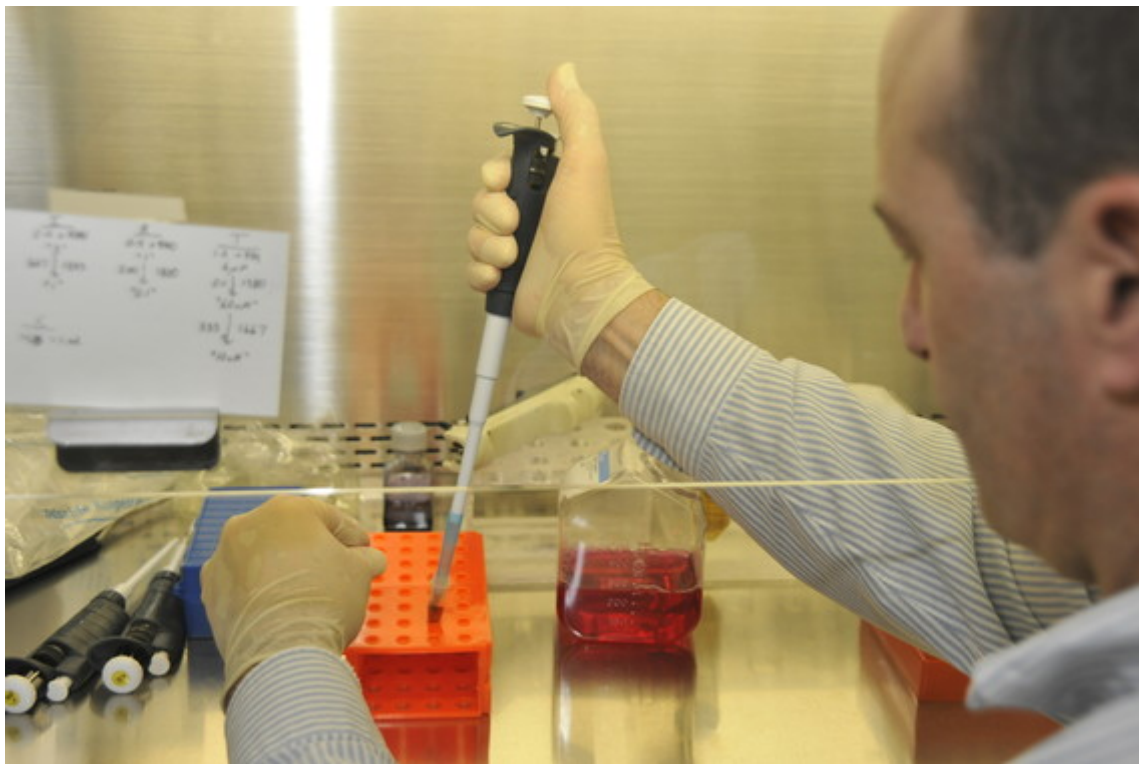
## **VA Research in the News**



### mRNA COVID-19 vaccines effective in cirrhosis patients, study finds

On July 14, [Fox News](#) reported on a VA study that found U.S. veterans experiencing cirrhosis, or damage to the liver, and who also received an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine saw high levels of protection against virus-related hospitalization and death. Researchers affiliated with the Bruce W. Carter VA Medical Center in Miami published findings in *JAMA Internal Medicine* on Tuesday, drawing from a retrospective study of 20,037 U.S. Veterans with cirrhosis who received at least one dose of vaccine at the Veterans Health Administration, compared with another 20,037 matched controls. The findings come as federal health authorities said the two groups of concern relating to potential use of booster shots include people 75 and older and those with a weakened immune system, or immunocompromised patients. The study authors at hand noted "patients with cirrhosis have immune dysregulation that is associated with vaccine hyporesponsiveness."

### Research Photo of the Month



Developing and enhancing motor recovery following stroke. VA researcher Dr. William Wolf investigates different pharmacological approaches for promoting new neural pathways in the brain, at the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital neuroscience lab. His work seeks to enhance rehabilitative therapy and improve functional recovery following a stroke. (Photo by Dan DuVerney)

Do you have photos of VA researchers in action or interesting science images from your lab? Share them with us! Send your photos to *ORD Field Update* editor Tristan Horrom at [tristan.horrom@va.gov](mailto:tristan.horrom@va.gov).



## Upcoming Events

- The next ORD Monthly Field Call will be held on **Aug. 16, 2021**, at 1:30 EST on Microsoft Teams.
- HSR&D's Scientific Merit Review Board and Career Development Award review meetings are both scheduled to take place virtually **Aug. 24–27, 2021**. HSR&D received 29 CDAs, 28 pilots, and 112 IIRs, for a total of 169 applications. For questions regarding the review process, please contact Scientific Merit Review Program staff at [vhacoscirev@va.gov](mailto:vhacoscirev@va.gov).
- The CSR&D annual Career Development Symposium for awardees will convene virtually this year on Monday, **Sept. 13**, and Tuesday, **Sept. 14**, for the bulk of the meeting, with Thursday, **Sept. 16** as the day for meetings with awardees in their portfolio. This symposium is typically a rich and valued experience for awardees, and we hope all of the local offices will help facilitate their awardees' participation in any way they can. Contact [Eric.schwinder@va.gov](mailto:Eric.schwinder@va.gov) and [Mark.Roltsch@va.gov](mailto:Mark.Roltsch@va.gov) for more information.



## Achievements and Milestones

We are looking for VA researchers who served in the military to feature in a series called [VA Researchers Who Served](#). The profiles explain the critical work that VA researchers do for the Veteran community and at the same time highlight and recognize their military service.

If you know a VA researcher who would be a good candidate for this series, please contact Mike Richman ([Michael.richman1@va.gov](mailto:Michael.richman1@va.gov)).

**New research agreement between VA and NIAID**—A [new agreement](#) between VA and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, signed June 28, will expand joint research between the two agencies on infectious diseases and related topics. NIAID, part of the National Institutes of Health, is a world leader in research on infectious, immunologic, and allergic diseases. Research funded by NIAID has led to numerous therapies, vaccines, and diagnostic tests. VA and NIAID already collaborate on infectious diseases and immune system disorders. The agencies, as part of a broad international public-private partnership, work together on the [Accelerated COVID-19 Therapeutic Interventions and Vaccines](#) initiative. Moreover, NIAID directly funds some 170 research projects at VA medical centers. The new agreement will continue these efforts while promoting “greater synergy” by further leveraging the unique strengths of each agency.

## Awards

**Under Secretary's Award for Outstanding Achievement in Health Services Research**—Dr. Donna Washington, director of the VA Office of Health Equity/QUERI Partnered Evaluation Initiative, professor of medicine at the UCLA Geffen School of Medicine, and staff physician at the Greater Los Angeles VA Healthcare System, is the recipient of this year's Under Secretary's Award for Outstanding Achievement in Health Services Research. She was selected among seven highly accomplished nominees to receive this award. Dr. Washington is an extraordinary, nationally recognized VA health services research scientist, devoted mentor, and a proven administrative leader. Her work has had and continues to have an outstanding impact on VHA, particularly in the areas of women's health and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Paralyzed Veterans of America Clinical Excellence Award in Therapy**—RR&D congratulates Rosemarie Cooper, Associate Director for Stakeholder Engagement at the RR&D Center for Wheelchairs and Assistive Robotics Engineering at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System. She is the recipient of the 2021 Paralyzed Veterans of America Clinical Excellence Award in Therapy. This award, presented annually, recognizes a clinician who has achieved national recognition in the provision of exceptional professional achievement, exemplary treatment, strong leadership, and personal advocacy to improve the lives of individuals living with spinal cord injury or disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or multiple sclerosis.

**ORD Research Supplement to Promote Diversity**—CSR&D is pleased to welcome the first awardee for the ORD Research Supplements to Promote Diversity, Dr. Nadir Balba from the VA Portland Health Care System. These competitively reviewed awards are intended to provide supplemental funds to a VA researcher in order to offer a mentored research experience to an early career scientist from an underrepresented background as they prepare for a VA Career Development Award application. Dr. Balba will be working with his funded VA mentor, Dr. Miranda Lim, to pilot an internet-delivered mindfulness intervention for Veterans with TBI/PTSD. Many congratulations to Drs. Balba and Lim as they pursue this highly significant research for our Veterans.

## Career Milestones

**ORD Director of Operations Marisue Cody retires**—Dr. Marisue Cody retired at the end of July after 25 years of service. She has been a well-respected leader and mentor to many in ORD and will be greatly missed. We wish her well in her next phase in life.

**NIH Health Care System Research Collaboratory participation**—Dr. Tassos Kyriakides, director of the West Haven CSP Coordinating Center, participated in a one day meeting on June 29, 2021, to provide insight and guidance to NIH on future directions for the NIH Health Care Systems Research Collaboratory (Rethinking Clinical Trials), often referred to as the NIH Collaboratory that funds “real world” clinical trials embedded in health care systems. The goal of the meeting in late June was to provide input on what the NIH Collaboratory could do in the future to increase the capacity of conducting trials in partnership with health care systems.

## History Corner



**The dangers of tobacco**—Dr. Oscar Auerbach, a pathologist at the East Orange, New Jersey VA Medical Center for more than four decades, was one of the leading scientists behind the Surgeon General’s first report on the dangers of tobacco. It was released more than 50 years ago, in 1964. The Surgeon General at the time, Dr. Luther Terry, would later recall that the report “hit the country like a bombshell.” It provided strong evidence—thanks, in large part, to Auerbach’s painstaking research—linking smoking to lung cancer and heart disease. Through today, it is credited with spurring a nationwide drop in smoking and saving hundreds of thousands of lives.



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