Research Funding Reaches $26 Million

From 1995 to 2000, annual NIH awards to faculty members increased substantially from $6.4 million to $12 million. In 2000, an additional $4.4 million in NIH funding was awarded to faculty members submitting grants as part of a VA project, the Massey Cancer Center, or the General Clinical Research Center. Thus, current totals are $16.4 million from federal funding. Other state, foundation, and industry awards for clinical trials total another $9.6 million for 2000. In sum, total current research funding for the Department is $26,042,430.

“The Department was somewhat flat with our federal funding in the early 90’s,” said Dr. Richard Wenzel, Professor and Chairman, “but in the last five years we have begun to move strongly. With improved infrastructure for reporting, the research leadership of Dr. Arun Sanyal, and careful recruiting of talented investigators, we will make remarkable strides in the next five years.”
Dear Colleagues:

Research is an essential component of an excellent Department of Internal Medicine, and we have ranked in the top 40% nationally and #50 in NIH rankings of academic departments for several years. Excellence in clinical care will bring great local and regional praise. Our teaching may give us some regional and national recognition. However, it is our research and scholarship that bring national and international prominence to our Department. Our goal is to move to the top 30 institutions, the top 20-25%, in the next five years. With success we will move from a prominent to a preeminent Department.

The Department is investing strongly in research. We have renewed efforts to acquire endowed professorships and chairs, freeing time for talented faculty members for investigation. We are recruiting faculty with proven skills and usually with a history of funding in research. New partnerships with other scientists are being fostered by individual Division Chairs, and the newly introduced interdisciplinary research seminars led by Dr. Arun Sanyal, Associate Chairman for Research, Chairman of the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology.

At the University level, the investment in infrastructure with eventually five IRB’s will add tremendous efficiency for investigators interested in clinical trials. We already have one of the most successful ... Dr. John Clore, Professor, Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism. The GCRC has over 35 years of continual NIH funding.

The research budgets at both the NIH and large pharmaceutical companies will double in the next few years. The funding opportunities, the commitment to the Department, the talent of the faculty, and the new infrastructure within the University all should offer us special advantages in the coming decade.

Richard P. Wenzel, M.D., M.Sc.
William Branch Porter Professor and Chairman

In a critical review of the Department of Internal Medicine’s Training Program for housestaff and fellows, David Taunton, M.D. of the American Board of Internal Medicine praised the Department, the leadership of Dr. Michael Edelson, and the faculty’s commitment to teaching. Dr. Edelson has directed the program since September 1995 during which time it has become nationally prominent.

In Memoriam: Susan Jackson Mellette, M.D.

Susan Mellette came to MCV in 1954 spending her entire career in attending cancer patients, providing hope, and sustaining their quality of life. She retired as Professor of Medicine and Rehabilitation Medicine in 1985. Most of us are unaware that Dr. Mellette joined MCV despite membership in a minority group that was subject to severe discrimination. Today, it is hard to conceive of women in medicine as a restricted minority, but when Susan began her career, admissions committees severely blocked the entry of women. Dr. Mellette eventually served on MCV’s Admission Committee and, for the competitive presence of women today in medicine and their growing presence in academic medicine, we owe much to her efforts. Early in her career, she cared for her children during the day and sustained her patients by rounding at night after she put the kids to bed. She didn’t hesitate to fight the shortsightedness of administrators or the victimizations of her patients by cancer. This woman was a true hero and all of us owe her a debt for taking on a sick system that denied women their births. She warmly supported her patients as their friend and champion. In this period of political correctness and the increasing depersonalization of care, we need more healers like Susan Mellette: a vital force who didn’t hesitate to explode against prejudice.

Contributed by Dr. William Regelson

From the Chairman

Dr. Arun Sanyal, Associate Professor, has been appointed Chairman of the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology succeeding the late Dr. Z. Reno Vlahcevic. “Our Division has traditionally been considered one of the strongest on the East Coast. I want to maintain and build upon our reputation to take a leadership position,” said Dr. Sanyal.

His plans are ambitious. Dr. Sanyal will build on the considerable clinical strengths of the Division and expand into areas where they are currently not meeting the demand, in particular the need to manage Hepatitis C and deal with the Hepatitis C epidemic. The Division needs more faculty to deal with morbidity disorders and irritable bowel syndrome. Finally, the Division will expand into gastroenterology oncology. “Our goal is to develop a multi-disciplinary model for clinical care. We are already confering with other departments and divisions on ways to accomplish this,” said Dr. Sanyal.

Dr. Sanyal plans to restructure the Division’s clinical base to better coordinate with research. He is creating an environment that allows for hypothesis-driven investigations by developing homogenous cohorts of patients. The cohorts will provide the platform needed for major clinical advances. This structure will also provide the mechanism for translating basic research to the bedside, with feedback to bench research.

For teaching efforts, Dr. Sanyal is revamping the educational programs of the Division, from the beginnings at the M-II level through fellowship training. His major initiative will be an integrated core curriculum that combines cell biology, molecular biology, developmental biology, pathophysiology, clinical presentations, radiology, and therapeutics.

Community-Based Faculty

Six years ago, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant was awarded to the three medical schools in Virginia to increase the number of general medicine physicians in the state. With matching funds from the General Assembly, the medical schools formed a consortium and founded the Generalist Initiative.

Dr. Rita Williet, Assistant Professor and Section Chair, Section of Community Medicine, has been instrumental in achieving the goals of the Generalist Initiative. A cornerstone of the Generalist Initiative was the revamping of the medical school curriculum, in particular, the first year medical course Foundations in Clinical Medicine. “Instituting this new course, Foundations in Clinical Medicine, has signaled a change from the old style of exams and interviews to a more effective format,” said Dr. Williet. Foundations of Clinical Medicine (FCM) is a two-year course for first- and second-year medical students designed to teach basic clinical skills, professionalism, medical interviewing, physical diagnosis, and clinical reasoning.

Presently about 340 students are matriculating through FCM. Each student is assigned a preceptor, a community physician to train with two afternoons each month. In a real clinical setting, the students are taught the skills needed to begin...
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