Learning to Care for Those in Harm’s Way
C.D.P. Director Named New Medical and Clinical Psychology Department Chair

Dr. David Riggs, one of the nation’s foremost psychologists and an expert on the effects of military service and deployments, will become chair of the Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology (MPS) at the F. Edward Hébert School of Medicine at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU). He will assume this new role in November 2015.

Riggs currently serves as executive director of USU’s Center for Deployment Psychology (CDP), a program he will continue to lead after he becomes MPS Chair. As executive director of the CDP, Riggs oversees the development and delivery of training seminars for behavioral health professionals to prepare them to provide for the needs of warriors and their families. Since 2006, the CDP has played a pivotal role in Department of Defense efforts to disseminate evidence-based psychotherapy for posttraumatic stress disorder and other psychological health problems as well as efforts to increase military cultural awareness among civilian behavioral health providers and more recently, other healthcare workers. In fact, CDP’s “Military Culture Online Course” is used as a core element of training in cultural awareness for VA and DoD providers and was recently recommended for civilian providers through Presidential Executive Action. In addition, the CDP has developed several innovative programs that leverage 21st-century communication technology to train providers in evidence-based treatment techniques at a distance.

Riggs earned his doctorate at Stony Brook University and completed a clinical psychology internship at the Medical University of South Carolina. Prior to his leadership position with the CDP, he held clinical research positions at the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety at the University of Pennsylvania and the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at the Boston Veterans Administration Medical Center. While in Boston, he held faculty positions at the Tufts University School of Medicine and Boston University School of Medicine.

A clinical and research psychologist, much of Riggs’ work focuses on trauma, violence and anxiety. He has a particular interest in the impact of PTSD and other anxiety disorders on the families of those directly affected by these conditions. He has published more than 80 articles and book chapters and presented more than 250 papers and workshops on topics including PTSD, domestic violence, and be-

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Secretary of Veterans Affairs visits USU

by Eric D. Ritter

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Robert A. McDonald visited the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, October 2, to deliver his message of the VA’s present and future vision for improving the lives of the veteran community.

McDonald was here at USU to reach out to the university community about the VA’s mission and vision. He engaged the audience in an extensive question and answer session addressing a multitude of questions about military and veteran’s healthcare.

“The VA and USU have a very close working relationship,” he said. “Many of the doctors currently in the VA medical system have retired from the military or finished their service obligation and brought what they learned [from USU] over to the VA.”

McDonald added that the VA and USU are some of the most proactive organizations when addressing issues such as PTSD.

“Mental health is a big issue,” he said. “This is a role the government and the DoD needs to continue taking leadership of and to work to solve it for the sake of the country.”

Since McDonald was appointed as Secretary of the VA, he said he goes out of his way to express his respect and gratitude to those who have chosen military medicine as their profession.

“This is the highest calling in the government,” he said. “To care for veterans who have put their lives on the line for all of us, is one of the greatest honors you can have.”

Dr. Art Kellermann, dean of the Hébert School of Medicine (left) meets with Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Robert A. McDonald, during the secretary’s visit to USU, October 2. (Photo by Tom Balfour)

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Dr. James Riggs, chair of the Department of Medical Psychology, meets with Dr. Art Kellermann, dean of the Hébert School of Medicine.

Behavioral therapy. He has also trained and supervised numerous students and mental health professionals from the United States and other countries in techniques for treating PTSD, obsessive compulsive disorder and other anxiety disorders. This includes training professionals in ways to address the emotional and psychological needs of survivors of combat, international terror, natural disasters, and sexual and physical assault.

The department Riggs will lead is one of USU’s first. Established in 1976, USU’s then-Department of Medical Psychology graduated its first Ph.D. students in 1984. In the early 1990s, at the request of the U.S. Congress, the department added a second Ph.D. program in Clinical Psychology to educate active duty psychologists for the military Services. In the late 1990s, a civilian Clinical Psychology track was added by the now renamed “Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology” to educate scientist-practitioners to deliver outstanding patient care and contribute to clinically-relevant science in psychology. Over the years, USU MPS graduates have gone on to become leaders in military clinical psychology, clinical research, clinical practice, and scholarship.

“We are thrilled that Dr. Riggs has agreed to assume the role of chair in one of USU’s most distinctive and important departments. Few medical schools have an autonomous clinical department dedicated to psychology; we have one of the nation’s best. Our warfighters deserve nothing less. Under Dr. Riggs’ leadership, we will advance the department’s mission to educate great practitioners and researchers, and make discoveries that will improve the psychological health and resilience of Service members and their families,” said Dr. Art Kellermann, dean of the Hébert School of Medicine.
Committee oversees USU strategic framework

In October of 2014, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU) President Dr. Charles Rice issued USU’s 2014-2018 Strategic Framework (SF) – the fundamental roadmap by which the University will navigate in the years ahead to realize its full potential as a key element in America’s defense establishment.

Recognizing the need for discipline and rigor in the real-world implementation of the SF, Rice then created the Standing Committee on Strategic Performance and Resourcing (SPR). The SPR has the President’s imprimatur to ensure the integration of the SF and SF-directed critical tasks throughout the USU community. The committee is co-chaired by Dr. Patrick Sculley, USU Senior Vice President, and retired Navy Capt. Steve Henske, Assistant Vice President for Accreditation and Organizational Assessment, with membership drawn from senior representatives from each of the University’s Responsibility Centers (RC).

Since its establishment, the SPR has focused on two key functional areas: how to determine whether USU is achieving the objectives laid out in the SF, and how the University is to meet SF-related resource requirements. These issues have been brought into sharp focus as the University’s RCs develop and implement their own strategic plans and institutional strategies. Performance assessments and resources are then captured in a series of “stop-light” charts that summarize where we are in terms of the implementation of the SF. As might be expected, the RCs are at different stages in their own strategic planning processes, and the University level “stop-lights” provide a compelling visual snapshot of progress in each RC and across the entire University.

The SPR also concentrates on the integration of strategy-related initiatives throughout the USU community, with particular emphasis on areas in which individual RC tasks require coordination with other RCs or support from the University staff. An example of this sort of integration is the recent establishment of USU’s Center for Global Health Engagement – an SF-driven initiative that crosses RC lines.

“What we are increasingly finding is that the implementation of RC strategies requires a ‘whole of University’ approach in which the assets and expertise of the entire institution must be brought to bear,” said Henske, underscoring the need for integration and unity of effort.

The SPR operates under some significant calendar-driven demands, the most important of which is the requirement to report on the SF to the Board of Regents by the end of the year and the need to prepare for the University’s annual strategic offsite which will be held in early January, 2016.

“The clock is ticking,” said Sculley. “But I’m pleased with how well we are working together and how far we have come in implementing a very ambitious University-level strategic framework.”
USU participates in International Military Medical School conference

Courtesy Article

Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU) President Dr. Charles Rice, along with Army Col. (Dr.) Jeffrey Hutchinson, associate dean for clinical affairs and Chief Diversity Officer at USU’s F. Edward Hébert School of Medicine, and medical students Navy Ensign David Lin and Army 2nd Lt. Amanda Case, participated in the first International Military Medical School Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, Sept. 1-3.

Military medical schools from Bangladesh, China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Russia, and Vietnam also participated. Highlights of the trip included a presentation, discussion and tour of the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences, established in 1977 as a joint research laboratory leading tropical infectious disease threat detection led by Maj. Gen. Sayan Sawatsri and Army Col. (Dr.) Christopher Soltis (SoM ’99).


Thailand’s Phramongkutklao College of Medicine also demonstrated their medical field exercise which they patterned after USU’s Bushmaster exercise.

“The conference was an overwhelming success building relationships and exchanging ideas in this international venue,” said Rice.
Women’s Health Nurse Practitioner Program providing military with specific female care

by Eric D. Ritter

The role of women in the military continues to grow as more and more females enter and make a career out of the military. Along with women’s increasing role within the Department of Defense comes a need for addressing their specific needs.

The Uniformed Services University’s (USU) Graduate School of Nursing (GSN) has developed a Women’s Health Nurse Practitioner Program (WHNP) that meets the specific health needs of women.

According to acting Program Director of Family and Women’s Health, Dr. Heather Johnson, the Women’s Health Nurse Practitioner program began in 2014 at the request of the Air Force to meet a stringent list of requirement it has for women’s health care.

“We were asked by the Air Force to develop a women’s health nurse practitioner program that meets the needs of the military,” Johnson said. “The Air Force is the only branch that specifically has active duty WHNPs, the other branches employ civilian WHNPs.

“The Women’s Health and Family Nurse Practitioner students sit through many of the same classes,” she explained. “The difference mainly comes down to the projects they do and the type and amount of women’s health clinical exposure they get across the program.” New content was added to enhance the skills of all students such as IUD (intrauterine device) insertion, embryology, drugs in pregnancy and lactation, among others.

Essentially, the WHNP is a program that ensures the specialized care of women of all ages.

“Many people think women’s health is limited to the genitalia and reproduction,” she said. “We look at it from a primary care perspective and try to take care of all their prevention needs as well as acute and chronic issues.” The students are even required to understand related men’s health concerns such as erectile dysfunction and STIs (sexually transmitted infections).

Johnson added that even though the other service branches outside of the Air Force don’t send their active duty students to the USU WHNP program, there still is a great deal of collaboration in other fields such as sexual assault training.

“Military members aren’t going to necessarily be near a stateside military base if they’re the victim of a sexual assault,” Johnson explained. She continued that the movement across the service branches is to ensure that appropriate sexual assault care is available at every military facility across the globe.

The program will also bring some welcome reassurance to female deployers. “In the deployed environment, there are a lot of unmet needs for our women service members,” Johnson said. “With this specialized program, our nurse practitioners can deploy and meet those needs in the field.”

Johnson concluded that there is an added benefit for the WHNP and dual track FNP/WHNP graduates. With their qualifications, they can sit for both the family and women’s health certification exams and be used in either billet.

USU, Georgetown Lombardi Cancer Center Awarded $4.5 Million for breast cancer study

By Sharon Holland

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) of the National Institutes of Health awarded $4.5 million to the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USU) and Georgetown Lombardi Cancer Center to study the impact of environmental metal and metalloid exposures on mammographic breast density, a marker of breast cancer.

The five-year study, which will be led by joint Principal Investigators Celia Byrne, Ph.D., an associate professor in USU’s Department of Preventive Medicine and Biostatistics, and Mary Beth Martin, Ph.D., a professor at the Georgetown Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer and former post-doctoral fellow at USU, will focus on the women in the Washington, DC, community who have been disproportionately affected by breast cancer and who

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live in areas with high levels of environmental metal exposures. Dr. Byrne is an epidemiologist who has been a leader in breast cancer research helping to establish the role of mammographic breast density as one of the strongest predictors of breast cancer risk. Dr. Martin is a biochemist who established the role of metals as “metallo-estrogens” showing that environmental levels of metals mimic the biological effects of hormones. Working with community groups in Washington, DC, the researchers will combine their efforts to determine the role of environmental metal exposure on mammographic breast density in women across the menopausal transition.

“This type of research is important since, by combining both a populations study and laboratory studies with community involvement, our study will work to address the reasons why Washington, DC, has one of the highest rates of breast cancer incidence in the country, “ said Byrne.

The award is part of the Breast Cancer and the Environment Research Program (BCERP) to support integrated scientific research to enhance knowledge of environmental and genetic factors underlying breast cancer risk. This funding opportunity will support trans-disciplinary research projects to investigate the influence of environmental exposures during specific time windows of susceptibility on breast cancer risk. The BCERP, a joint effort by the NIEHS and the National Cancer Institute, began in 2003 and was renewed in 2010.
Lt. General Mark Andrew Brilakis (center), Commanding General, Marine Corps Recruiting Command, visited USU to help the Navy and Marine Corps staff celebrate the United States Navy’s 240 birthday. (Photo by MC3 Laura Bailey)