Introduction

Fifth Annual NIH Interdisciplinary Women's Health Research Symposium November 19, 2008

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THE FIFTH ANNUAL NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH (NIH) Interdisciplinary Women's Health Research Symposium marks another milestone in the progress and expansion of a multidimensional approach to women's health research, development of a new cadre of research scientists in interdisciplinary pursuits of women's health, and exploration of biological, behavioral, genetic, and other factors that may cause differences between the sexes in health and disease. The contributors to this symposium, and their abstracts that are published in this issue of the *Journal of Women's Health*, are from two major initiatives of the NIH Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH), the institutional career development program, Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH), and the Specialized Centers of Research on Sex and Gender Factors Affecting Women's Health (SCOR). These two innovative programs address several parts of the mission of the ORWH, which was established by the NIH in 1990 to enhance and expand research on women's health and to develop programs to support the advancement of women in biomedical careers as well as both men and women as women's health researchers.

Much thought had been given to the plea of women's health advocates to promote healthcare that would alleviate the fragmented approach to women's health issues. Considering the mission of the NIH ORWH and concepts promoted through the NIH Research Agenda for Women's Health for the 21st Century, interdisciplinary research appeared to be an optimum way for NIH to respond through the incorporation of concepts of integrated collaboration across scientific disciplines and clinical specialties through interdisciplinary career development and research centers.

When the ORWH first introduced the concept of career development in interdisciplinary research for junior faculty women and men who had recently completed clinical training or postdoctoral programs, the BIRCWH was developed with a number of basic concepts in mind: to encourage and facilitate, through a strongly mentored interdisciplinary pro-

gram, the opportunity to become independent investigators pursuing basic, clinical, translational, or health services research relevant to women's health. The junior faculty selected by the participating programs and referred to as BIRCWH scholars would thus be able to advance their academic research careers through innovative interdisciplinary mentoring to assist them in successfully obtaining their first independent grant support at this critical transition point in their professional development. In 2007, 15 new or continuing BIRCWH programs nationwide were funded, representing a total of 50 such awards through four funding cycles.

Since its inception in 2000, a total of 335 women and men have participated as BIRCWH scholars, with 178 having completed their programs, 126 still active scholars in new or continuing programs, and only 31 who withdrew for a variety of reasons. Of the scholars, 79% have been women, 21% have been men. There has been a broad diversity of disciplines and specialties represented among the scholars, and the disciplines of the senior investigators who serve as mentors have been even more varied. An analysis is underway to evaluate the research grants and career paths that have resulted from participation in this program. Although the intent of the BIRCWH program is career development, the research advances that have resulted from the efforts of the scholars cannot be overlooked and are quite encouraging as this new cadre of interdisciplinary research scientist advance in their careers.

The abstracts included in this symposium demonstrate the broad array of interests and accomplishments of current BIRCWH scholars. The majority of the funding for these programs comes from the ORWH, but there has also been programmatic and fiscal support from other NIH components, including the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), which administers the BIRCWH program, the National Institute on Aging, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskele-

tal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the NIH Office of Dietary Supplements, as well as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

In September 2007, the ORWH announced 11 new or continuing SCOR awards as a result of the second solicitation for this program. These interdisciplinary research centers provide opportunities for innovative approaches to research on sex/gender-related health effects. Each SCOR necessarily includes both basic science and clinical interdisciplinary projects that explore an important issue related to sex/gender health differences and that are designed to advance scientific discoveries out of the laboratory and into the clinical environment. The scope of research undertaken by the SCORs is based on three sources: the Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *Exploring the Biological Contributions to Health: Does Sex Matter?* the ORWH publication, *An Agenda for Research on Women's Health for the 21st Century*, and recommendations from NIH Institutes and Centers. Women's health research priority areas, including depression, addiction, reproductive health, metabolic disorders, osteoporosis, such pain disorders as irritable bowel disorders and interstitial cystitis, pelvic floor disorders, osteoporosis, lower urinary tract function, and urinary tract infections, are being addressed by the current grantees of this ORWH initiative.

The SCORs are cofunded by NIAMS, which administers these centers, NICHD, NIMH, NIDA, the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, and the Food and Drug Administration.

The 11 specialized centers, including 7 programs that successfully competed for renewal and thus are continuing their

efforts, reported publishing 113 journal papers, 144 abstracts, and 30 other publications during the first year of this cycle for awards made in 2007. The progress being made based on interdisciplinary basic research that translates to the bedside has been very exciting and is represented in the abstracts from the SCORs that follow in this issue. What has been even more encouraging are reports that some of the specialized centers that have developed cross-discipline translational approaches to research, derived from the thrusts of their SCOR award, are now evolving further, influencing other institutional approaches to research that will assist efforts to better appreciate and clarify sex and gender factors that affect health and disease. If the interdisciplinary aspects of the BIRCWH and SCOR programs result in more cross-discipline and multispecialty collaboration in research, mentoring, and attention to women's health, we can look forward to investigators and clinicians who are collaborating in a more comprehensive and less fragmented approach to women's health, pushing forward scientific endeavors to new horizons.

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