Leadership changes at the Transplantation Biology Research Center

AFTER MORE THAN two decades of leading the MGH Transplantation Biology Research Center (TBRC), David H. Sachs, MD, is stepping down from his role as director. He will remain, however, an active member of the team as scientific director. Joren C. Madsen, MD, DPhil, and Laurence Turka, MD, have been named co-directors of the center.

Sachs established the TBRC in 1991, and it since has grown into a 50-person group of researchers and physicians who collaborate across disciplines to advance the science of transplantation, as well as MGH’s clinical transplantation tolerance program. The transplantation tolerance protocol includes transplanting bone marrow cells from an organ donor in conjunction with the organ transplant. The goal is to induce the recipient’s body to eventually accept the transplanted organ without the need for life-long immunosuppressive drugs, which can have debilitating side effects. While the protocol is still considered experimental, the center is focused on working with MGH transplant clinicians to make it a mainstream option in the future.

“I hope this will continue to be a center for translational research and clinical applications as we advance the tolerance program,” Sachs says. “I intend to concentrate more fully on my own laboratory work in transplantation biology and xenotransplantation and continue to bring what we are doing in the lab to the transplant clinicians and ultimately to our patients.”

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MGHers guiding the development of mental health services in war-torn country

IMAGINE LIVING in a country recently emerging from a 14-year civil war that resulted in the deaths of 250,000 of its people and the displacement of an additional 1 million – with just one psychiatrist to care for 3.7 million survivors. Liberia saw the end of armed conflict in 2003 and has since experienced an influx of international support to develop sorely needed medical services. Elizabeth Levey, MD, and Oriana Vesga-Lopez, MD – both fourth year residents in the MGH McLean Adult Psychiatry Residency Program working with the Chester M. Pierce, MD Division of Global Psychiatry – have twice traveled to Liberia’s capital of Monrovia to help guide the development of mental health services in the war-torn country.

Their work began more than a year ago, as the two analyzed data from a community needs assessment conducted by David Henderson, MD, director of the MGH Division of Global Psychiatry, who serves as the pair’s mentor. Levey and Vesga-Lopez say mental health is an oft-overlooked component of global health, where communicable disease tends to be the primary focus. However, underlying mental illness can disrupt the care a patient receives for a communicable disease, so understanding culturally relevant ways of addressing mental illness can boost other health indicators as well. “We are trying to get a sense of how the population in Liberia experiences both well-being and distress,” says Vesga-Lopez.

Levey and Vesga-Lopez hope to qualitatively describe the perceptions of mental illness and mental health in the adolescent and university-aged adult populations. Through interviews that detail the physical, psychological and psychosocial problems and symptoms experienced by these groups, Levey and Vesga-Lopez also learned about the ways they recovered from illness and what that meant to them.

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Addressing global challenges

THE MGH CENTER FOR GLOBAL HEALTH and the Vincent Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology hosted an inaugural “Women in Global Health Symposium: Women Leaders Responding to Global Challenges” March 27 at the Ragon Institute of MGH, MIT and Harvard. More than 120 people attended the symposium, which featured MGH women who are committed to making a difference in the lives of people across the globe, particularly those who don’t have access to quality health care. Speakers were, from left, Elizabeth Bailey, MPP, director for the Consortium for Affordable Medical Technologies; Blair Wylie, MD, MPH, of the Vincent Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology; Vanessa Bradford Kerry, MD, MSc, associate director for Partnerships and Global Initiatives in the Center for Global Health; David Bangsberg, MD, MPH, director of the Center for Global Health; Hilarie Cranmer, MD, MPH, director of Disaster Response in the Center for Global Health; Joy Williams, RN, staff nurse in the Department of Radiology; Jeanette Ives Erickson, RN, DPN, FAAN, senior vice president for Patient Care and chief nurse; Patricia Hibberd, MD, PhD, chief of the Division of Global Health; and Galit Alter, PhD, of the Department of Medicine and the Ragon Institute.

— TBRC

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The TBRC, which is part of the Transplant Center, works closely with the Bone Marrow Transplantation Unit of the Department of Medicine. Madsen and Turka plan to continue to grow and strengthen this relationship, as well as develop new relationships with experts in related fields — including molecular biology, cellular immunology, infectious disease, autoimmunity, regenerative medicine and cancer. “My hope is to build upon the tremendous accomplishments that the TBRC has achieved in the last 20 years and expand upon them, taking advantage of new advancements as they arise in order to make tolerance transplantation a reality for more patients,” says Turka.

Madsen, who will remain in his current role as director of the MGH Transplant Center, credits Sachs for his mentorship, his dedication to the TBRC and for his achievements in tolerance, and says he looks forward to building upon those advancements in the future. “With Larry coming on board, we have arguably the best transplant immunology laboratory in the world — not the country, but the entire world,” Madsen says.

— Global health

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“Despite the amount of traumatic experiences they were exposed to, I was quite surprised to see how resilient the population has been and how they have been able to recover without any significant interventions in terms of mental health,” Vesga-Lopez says.

As part of their study, Levey looked at how 13- to 18-year-old Liberians deal with mental illness. Her preliminary findings show that a person’s sense of community — who they live with, what their daily life is like, who they turn to for support and their familial responsibilities – has a profound effect on their ability to cope with past traumatic experiences.

These findings also can shape the way that care is delivered here at the MGH and in surrounding communities. “We see so many people who live in very different worlds, very different environments, very different cultures from each other, and thinking about their interactions with their community, in addition to their medications, can prove very valuable,” says Levey.

Adds Vesga-Lopez, “I had this idea that, if you’re going to do work internationally, you’re bringing something to them. It was striking for me to see how much we could learn from a different culture. It goes both ways.”

Global Psychiatry hosts dinner series

THE CHESTER M. PIERCE, MD Division of Global Psychiatry will continue its Global Psychiatry Dinner series on April 22 at 6 pm in the Trustees Room with speaker Greg Fricchione, MD, associate chief of Psychiatry. These monthly events are open to all. For more information or to register, email jcarney1@partners.org.
Following in her father’s footsteps

FOR MICHAEL SHEA, his fifth time running the Boston Marathon as part of the Mass General Marathon Team will be unique because he will have his inspiration – his daughter Elizabeth – running alongside him.

In 2001, Elizabeth was diagnosed with histiocytosis, a form of cancer that caused tumors to grow in her bones. Following months of treatment at Mass General Hospital for Children, the then-11-year-old was in remission by the end of 2002. Michael wanted to find a way to give back to the Pediatric Hematology-Oncology Unit and show his gratitude to those who cared for her during her battle. “They said we have a marathon team, and I laughed and said, ’Good for you, I’m not a runner. I’ve never run more than five miles in my life,” recalls Michael.

Instead the Shea family enrolled Elizabeth in the team’s Patient Partner Program in which a team member was assigned to run in her honor. However, Michael says, while cheering for the team during that 2003 marathon he realized that he not only wanted to – but could – be the person running in her honor. “So that day I decided to do it,” he says.

The next year he joined the MGH team – and did so again in 2005, 2006 and 2007. During his last marathon, Elizabeth, then 15, joined him at Mile Marker 20, and they ran the last six miles together. They crossed the finish line holding hands – an inspirational moment for Elizabeth. “I was a sophomore in high school, and it was the first time it really resonated that I wanted to do this for real some day,” she says.

Now 21 and a senior at Babson College, Elizabeth is celebrating her 10th anniversary of being cancer-free by doing just that. On April 15, she will follow in her father’s footsteps as a member of the Mass General Marathon Team – running alongside her dad. “I have a great picture of us crossing the finish line in 2007, and I’m looking forward to having the real deal this year,” she says.

For more information about the Mass General Marathon Team, visit https://give.massgeneral.org/marathon.

ESOL students showcase new skills

THE STUDENTS in Dara Mendelsohn’s MGH Workplace Education Program’s JVS English Fundamentals class recently put their newly developed language skills to use when they presented a hand hygiene program to their supervisors, instructors and invited guests.

The English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students – Berhan Giorgis, Fatiba Ngout, Hamid Hassine, Maria Alves, Maria Jimenez, Mina Makane, Seandel Dillon and Sulma Garcia – presented five skits outlining the importance of hand hygiene during the March 28 event. “The students worked very hard to create their skits and the program flyers, which supported an important message here at MGH that ‘clean hands save lives,”’ Mendelsohn said.

“Their hard work and dedication really shows, and I am so very proud of them.”

For more information on MGH Training and Workforce Development initiatives, visit http://is.partners.org/hr/New_Web/mgh/mgh_training.htm
First donor in new location

PHLEBOTOMIST George Chappell, left, draws blood from Christopher Stowell, MD, PhD, director of Blood Transfusion Services. On April 3, Stowell was the first person to donate blood in the MGH Blood Donor Center’s new location on White 12. All Blood Transfusion Service operations have temporarily relocated to the 12th floor of the White Building, while its home in the Jackson/Gray buildings undergoes renovations. All blood donors in the month of April will be entered to win a pair of passes to the New England Aquarium. For more information, call 617-726-8177.

Susan Briggs, MD, MPH, director of the International Trauma and Disaster Institute at the MGH, will be honored in June with a Project Hope Global Health Partner Award. Founded in 1958, Project HOPE (Health Opportunities for People Everywhere) is dedicated to providing lasting solutions to health crises, with the mission of helping people to help themselves. Briggs is recognized for her involvement in disaster relief efforts, both internationally and domestically, including the Haiti earthquake and Hurricane Katrina.

Annie Borden, RN, MPH, CHFN, of the Heart Failure Transitions Program, was honored by Project Hope as its February Volunteer of the Month. The global health organization recognized Borden for her distinguished service, including her recent trip to Alluri Sitaramaraju Academy of Medical Sciences Hospital in Vijayawada, India. While in India, Borden helped build nursing capacity at the hospital and completed a tropical medicine course. As a volunteer with Project Hope, Borden has also provided aid in Haiti, Benin, Togo, Panama, Honduras and Nicaragua.

The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) will inaugurate its first class of the Fellows of the AACR Academy at its April 6-7 annual meeting in Washington, D.C. 2009 Nobel Prize laureate Jack Szostak, PhD, of the Department of Molecular Biology and the Center for Computational and Integrative Biology, has been selected as a member of the inaugural class. The AACR Academy was created to recognize and honor distinguished scientists whose major scientific contributions have propelled significant innovation and progress against cancer.

A spring tradition

MASSENGERAL HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN patients and their siblings were treated to a sunny day during the eighth annual Spring Egg Hunt on March 29. The children searched for goodie-filled eggs from the grounds of the Howard Ulfelder, MD, Healing Garden in the Yawkey Center and posed for photos with the Spring Bunny. Here Lily Waldeck, 7, admires an egg she found.