A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN:

Dear friends,

When I joined VCU in January, I could not have predicted that COVID-19 would become a catalyst to quickly unify a department under a new chairman. Thanks to the steadfast dedication of countless individuals, we have successfully adapted our daily work and shifted to telemedicine for many of our outpatients. Our ability to serve more patients “closer to home” remains a positive outcome.

Department research programs continue to flourish and attract national and international attention. Michael Neale, Ph.D., and James Bjork, Ph.D., recently received nearly $11 million in renewed federal grant funding for their ABCD study, a long-term project that focuses on adolescent brain development. Outcomes from this research will provide invaluable understanding of the impact that sleep, screen time, obesity and substance use have on developing brains, along with other important insights for millions of people and generations to come.

In June we wished our graduating residents farewell while welcoming our newest trainees, an excellent cohort of psychiatry residents, to the MCV Campus. How we educate the next generation of trainees during a pandemic will likely test us, but ultimately lead to innovation for the greater good.

It is a true privilege to serve as your chairman. Your ongoing support and interest in the care of our patients and the advancement of research innovation is deeply appreciated. Thank you.

Respectfully,

ROBERT L. FINDLING, M.D., M.B.A. (M.D.'87/M)
C. Kenneth and Dianne Wright Distinguished Chair in Clinical and Translational Research
Chairman, Department of Psychiatry

Landmark Adolescent Brain Study Motivates VCU Professors

Two VCU professors continue to serve as co-principal investigators of a groundbreaking NIH-funded study through 2027.

“Science is months of drudgery punctuated by the occasional sublime epiphany. And that’s why we do it.” So says James Bjork, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine’s Department of Psychiatry and the VCU Institute for Drug and Alcohol Studies. Since 2015, he and his colleague, Michael Neale, Ph.D., a professor of Psychiatry and Human & Molecular Genetics and a researcher at the VCU Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, have served as co-principal investigators on the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study, the largest study on adolescent brain development and child health in the United States.

The study, funded by the National Institutes of Health, and recently renewed through March 2027, includes a consortium of more than 100 principal investigators at 21 research sites across the country, which have recruited nearly 12,000 children ages 9-10 (including 2,100 twins or triplets) to join. As one of the sites, VCU researchers use standardized protocols, assessments and the latest neuroimaging technology to determine how childhood experiences interact with each other and with a child’s changing biology to affect brain development and social, behavioral, academic, health and other outcomes.

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twin registry in the country, in order to determine hereditary and environmental influences. “Data from twins provide ideal controls,” Neale says. “If we consider twin pairs, each one has a really nice control, their cotwin. This person has the same (if identical or half the same if fraternal) genes and the same home environment. Correlations between brain measures and outcomes, within and across twins, permits some causal inferences. The combination with the longitudinal design allows for triangulation of the evidence from these two sources, to see if they are consistently saying brain causes behavior, behavior causes brain, or both are caused by something else.”

Every other year, study participants undergo a six- to seven-hour visit that includes a two-hour brain scan, a large suite of neuropsychological performance tests and a collection of vital samples. In the intervening year assessments, children attend a two-hour session to perform a handful of cognitive tasks and receive a mental health and substance use checkup. In addition, researchers call each participant in the middle of each year to check in: “We have our finger on the pulse of each child every six months,” Bjork says.

With the advent of COVID-19, the consortium rapidly mobilized a revised protocol. Standard assessment visits have gone virtual, and questionnaires about children’s anxiety and virus-related behavior have been instituted. “We’ll be able to relate that to their other brain data,” Bjork says. “It’s a very time-sensitive opportunity that the consortium is seizing.”

The open-access nature of the study means that Bjork, Neale and the other investigators on the project have no advantage over the data. To date, data from the study has resulted in 32 published research papers, including one published in Nature Medicine in January 2020 that noted the association between lead exposure and its effects on childhood brain development. Findings such as this can influence future health policy changes.

The appointment of renowned pediatric psychiatry researcher Robert L. Findling, M.D., MBA, M’87, as the chair of VCU’s Department of Psychiatry fits perfectly with the type of research conducted in the ABCD Study, according to Bjork. “He is a very appropriate chair for the type of pediatric research we have going on because, unfortunately, a percentage of these now 11-, 12- and 13-year-olds are going to develop schizophrenia or affective disorders by the time this study ends,” he says. “And we will know what the brain of a schizophrenic looked like—it’s structure, its connectivity, its function—when that child was only 9 or 10.”

The hope of those types of results keeps Bjork and Neale motivated for the next seven years of the study. “The long-term goal of COVID-19 is to have a positive effect on public health,” Neale says. “Improvements in public health in the past happened because we devoted the time to research studies and translated them to public policy or to the clinic for prevention and treatment. With the brain, we can pick up the early warning signals, an ounce of prevention is likely to work better than pounds of cure.”

SAVE THE DATE!
Chef's Dinner

Benefiting: THE VIRGINIA TREATMENT CENTER FOR CHILDREN
Join us... for a virtual event
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2020 6:30 P.M.
In lieu of an in-person event, we will host a curbside pick-up dinner from Chopbar followed by a Zoom virtual happy hour.

For more information, contact Lynn Meyer, lynn.meyer@vcuhealth.org

support.vcu.edu/chefs_dinner

Coping with the CORONAVIRUS

by Penelope M. Carrington

Some think you should map out your whole career. Not Margaret Rittenhouse, LCSW. She spent her early years hopscotching the globe with six siblings and parents in the Foreign Service. Ghana (her birthplace), England, Toronto, Florida. Once in the Sunshine State, a middle school book report on Mahatma Gandhi started Rittenhouse on a winding road to life as Clinical Director of VCU’s HelpLink Employee Assistance Program.

“I listen to what feeds me and go towards that. I move away from things that are deadening and deepen the soul.” That translated to a diversity of choices from a job selling steel to a stint in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps—similar to the Peace Corps—and a master’s degree in social work from Loyola University in Chicago, IL. With COVID-19, Rittenhouse’s ability to pivot and stay nimble came to the fore.

“When it hit, the intensity and stress was palpable” for healthcare and frontline workers in the VCU Health System, she said. Several months later, the sprint turned into an ultra-marathon. “People are getting worn down... Now they’re realizing that this is not going away,” Rittenhouse said. “But it’s not just one issue at this point. It’s COVID-19 and racial issues combined with other losses or things people are going through. It’s huge.”

Such uncertainty, grief and triggering of past trauma has tripled the demand for the mental health services Rittenhouse said her program provides to employees and those living in their households. Those in need can find help via a dedicated helpline, telephone sessions and virtual presentations.

“Resiliency tools are going to help people manage this anxiety and fear,” she said. “You can’t hug people, but you can go on a social distance walk with a neighbor.”

Rittenhouse offered creative ways to adapt including exercise and mindfulness during a series of Coping with the Coronavirus virtual presentations that were offered recently to VCU Health team members. She also hosts in-person pop up sessions for managers and other teams to address critical incidents, employee losses and compassion fatigue.

“Our employees are our priority. That’s my passion, my heart and my job.”

Thursdays, October 1, 2020

6:30 PM

The significance of anxiety...
Local Garden Clubs Honor Essential Workers

Staff at the Virginia Treatment Center for Children were surprised by area garden club members as they assembled a heart-shaped topiary designed to honor their dedication to children’s mental health. Containers of flowers offered team members and patient families with an opportunity to take home a seasonal bouquet designed to brighten their day. MM

At VCU Psychiatry, we know individuals and families are navigating through life’s difficulties and changes. Below are some useful community resources.

Cameron K. Gallagher Mental Health Resource Center:
mentalhealth4kids.org
Families seeking behavioral health services for children can call Cameron’s Center and speak with a family navigator, free of charge. Staff can help you in finding therapists, psychiatrists, or other appropriate services.

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry:
aacap.org
The AACAP promotes the healthy development of children, adolescents, and families through advocacy, education, and research.

National Alliance on Mental Illness:
nami.org
NAMI is the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for millions of Americans affected by mental illness.