

THE TRIBUNE

OCTOBER 2019

Midas Touch

McElfish Leverages TRI Support to Advance Translational Research

Backed by new federal funding, Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., MBA, is expanding the study of a promising community-based intervention to combat type 2 diabetes mellitus in the Marshallese community of northwest Arkansas.

A TRI pilot grant supported testing of the culturally adapted diabetes self-management education (DSME) model developed by McElfish and her team at the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus in Fayetteville. In July, McElfish received a \$3.77 million National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities grant to test the intervention in Marshallese faith-based organizations.

Also known as the family model DSME, the intervention will be tested over five years in 24 Marshallese churches, with

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Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., (far left), addresses pastors' spouses from the Marshallese Community in Northwest Arkansas.



Dear Colleagues,

Dr. Pearl McElfish counts as one of TRI's earliest and most energetic partners. In 2013 she was working hard to help the nascent UAMS Northwest Regional Campus gain a foothold in research. She worked closely with TRI

leadership and our Community Engagement Program, frequently driving from Fayetteville to Little Rock to brainstorm with us and other UAMS leaders.

With her talent for community engagement, Dr. McElfish has moved quickly to build meaningful connections in Northwest Arkansas, notably among the Marshallese and Hispanic communities.

Dr. McElfish has turned TRI pilot funding and other support into an impressive array of federal funding. Her

efforts to address the extraordinary diabetes rate among Marshallese have garnered funding to test and expand a promising diabetes intervention in Hispanic and African-American communities. In recent months she and her team have seen funding announcements that exceeded \$10 million. Those grants came on top of more than \$20 million in active grants that Dr. McElfish was already overseeing.

Now vice chancellor for the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus, Dr. McElfish is leading a national and internationally respected research program. We applaud her success and look forward to furthering our highly productive partnership.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laura James, M.D." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Laura James, M.D.
Director, TRI

Associate Vice Chancellor for Clinical and Translational Research, UAMS

Midas Touch

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Marshallese community health workers serving as educators. In addition to measuring outcomes, the study will include a cost-effectiveness analysis.

The Marshallese are a Pacific Islander community with significant health disparities and some of the highest type 2 diabetes rates in the world. Estimates of type 2 diabetes for Marshallese range from 20% to 50% compared to 8.3% for the U.S. as a whole.

\$30 Million-Plus

McElfish, vice chancellor for the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus, is also in final contract negotiations for a multi-million PCORI grant that will span the next three years. The funding will support testing of the diabetes family model DSME in Hispanic and African-American populations in rural UAMS Regional Programs Clinics.

The knowledge gained from the 2017 pilot study as well as the community-based approaches developed in collaboration with TRI's community engagement team have been instrumental in leveraging larger grants, she said.

McElfish's research team also received an additional \$2 million this summer for a related study. The more than \$10 million in grants in recent months are on top of more than \$20 million in active federal grants that she was already leading.

"The seed funding and other community engagement support from TRI has been so valuable in expanding translational research to underserved populations," she said. "The additional research infrastructure that TRI provides has been essential to our overall success going back to the establishment of our campus' research program in 2013."

Broad Implementation

The 2017 TRI pilot tested the culturally adapted DSME model. The 10-hour intervention found that the Marshallese participants' glycated hemoglobin (HbA1c) decreased by statistically significant levels, along with improved blood pressure and cholesterol. The pilot allowed the research team to apply for additional NIH and PCORI funding.

McElfish makes the case that the Marshallese are underrepresented in research; they are experiencing a health crisis that must be addressed; and that broad implementation of the family model DSME could have a significant impact.

Funding organizations have agreed. For the NIH study, McElfish's team will recruit 288 diabetic Marshallese patients along with 288 of their family members to participate in the church-based intervention.

"Our research over the last few years tells us the family model DSME works, and we've tested it in a variety of settings with different populations," McElfish said. "If our hypothesis is demonstrated in this randomized controlled trial, we can expand the reach of the intervention and sustain it long-term."

Researcher Profile



Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., MBA

Vice Chancellor, UAMS Northwest
Regional Campus

Associate Professor, UAMS College
of Medicine, Internal Medicine

What inspired you to become a researcher?

I have always loved exploring and solving problems. Research is all about exploration and identifying and solving problems.

What do you like most about your area of research?

I love translational research, because I know that my findings will immediately help people live longer, healthier lives.

What do you enjoy the most about your job?

I most enjoy working with all the institutes and departments across UAMS and with our partner institutions. It is satisfying to be able to facilitate research efforts in so many different areas and fascinating to meet many diverse people.

What career would you have chosen if not a researcher?

I would love to be a professional hiker, but the Koshi sponsorship has not come through yet.

What current or former health researcher do you admire most and why?

I have so much respect for all the biostatistics faculty who allow me to do my job (shout out to James Selig, Chris Long, Rachelle Jean-Louis, Zoran Bursac)!

TRI's Jenkins Installed as SOCRA President



Amy Jo Jenkins, M.S., will serve as SOCRA president for the next year.

Amy Jo Jenkins, M.S., CCRP, CCRA, CCRC, TRI Executive Director, was installed as president of the Society of Clinical Research Associates (SOCRA) during a Sept. 27 ceremony in San Antonio, Texas.

Jenkins led the establishment of the Arkansas chapter of SOCRA and is a past chair. SOCRA chapters offer no-cost clinical research continuing education to enhance research quality, to protect research participants, and to improve the health of the global community.

This year's SOCRA Annual Conference welcomed about 1,200 attendees. The three-day conference offered the latest information and tools, best practices and training to help its members stay up to date and compliant in their clinical research practice. The program featured over 100 academic sessions, a peer-driven poster session, and an exhibit program.



(L-R) Mtonya Hunter-Lewis, MBA, Beatrice Boateng, Ph.D., and Pam Christie, B.A., presented posters at the conference.

The presenters and poster titles are:

- **Beatrice Boateng, Ph.D.**, TRI director of evaluation and associate professor, College of Medicine Department of Pediatrics; "Sensitive Research Study Records: Do They Belong in the Patient Medical Record? – A Preliminary Study"
- **Pam Christie, B.A., CRS**, TRI senior project manager, research recruitment, stakeholder engagement, "Stakeholder Engagement Makes a Difference: Improving the Site Selection Processes for Clinical Trials"
- **Mtonya Hunter-Lewis, MBA, CPC, CCRP**, TRI associate director, regulatory support, "Utility of a Web-based Research Protocol Development Tool: One Institution's Experience"

Research on the Horizon: New TRI Study of the Month

- **UAMS Principal Investigator:** Rani Lindberg, M.D., Associate Professor, College of Medicine Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation; and Erika Petersen, M.D., Associate Professor, COM Department of Neurosurgery.
- **Summary:** A phase 3 multi-site study (PISCES III) of surgically implanted stem cells in the brains of study participants who are physically disabled by ischemic stroke.
- **Significance:** Earlier phase studies have shown promise regenerating neural tissue that helped participants recover limb function. Could also be potential treatment for additional neurologic injuries.
- **TRI Services:** Medicare coverage analysis, study budget review and negotiation, IRB submission, completion of sponsor's regulatory startup packet, training for study staff/investigators, oversight of enrollment startup, and research nurse coordinator services.
- **Sponsor:** ReNeuron



Rani Lindberg, M.D., is assisted on the study by TRI's Danielle Evans, M.H.A.

TRI Holds First UAMS-Wide Research Expo



Yuet-Kin "Ricky" Leung, Ph.D., (left) with Nagai C. "Neville" Tam, Ph.D., said he discovered new services at the Expo.

The UAMS Research Expo was a new experience for Yuet-Kin "Ricky" Leung, Ph.D., and one that will help get his research on solid footing as a new faculty member.

"I had no clue before how many units or service groups were available to help me," said Leung, an associate professor in the College of Medicine Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology.

Leung, along with about 150 other UAMS faculty and research staff, was able to check out most of the 30-

plus research services represented at the Sept. 10 event.

This year's Expo marked an expansion of TRI's Open Houses held the past two years. TRI and the UAMS Office of Research Compliance co-sponsored the Expo, inviting all UAMS-wide research service providers as well as its partners, Arkansas Children's Research Institute (ACRI) and the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System.

This year's event also included ice cream, hors d'oeuvres and door prizes drawn by Stephanie Gardner, Ed.D., UAMS provost and chief strategy officer.

Nidhi Kapoor, M.D., assistant professor in the College of Medicine Department of Neurology, is already familiar with many of TRI's research services, she said, but the event made her aware of additional research amenities.

Jami Jones, research program director at the Center for Childhood Obesity Prevention, found promising new connections for her center's researchers based at ACRI.

"I think that both ACRI and UAMS offer great support for research and it was exciting to learn about new resources and opportunities for collaboration," Jones said.

Chenghui Li, Ph.D., an associate professor in the College of Pharmacy Department of Pharmaceutical Evaluation and Policy, said having all the services in one place helped her clarify what each program does.



Gov. Asa Hutchinson recently recognized TRI for the five years of federal funding totaling \$24.2 million that it received to support translational research at UAMS. During an Oct. 14 photo at the state Capitol, the governor (center) told the group of research leaders and staff, including TRI Director Laura James, M.D., (to the governor's left) and UAMS Chancellor Cam Patterson, M.D., MBA, (to James' left) of his strong support for UAMS' clinical and research missions.

The **TRIBUNE** is produced by the UAMS Translational Research Institute (TRI). It is supported by grant ULI TR003107 through the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NIH.

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