Welcome to the Focus on Health Newsletter

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It is my pleasure as the director of division of Health Policy and Social Science Research (HPSSR) to present the introductory issue of our newsletter – “Focus on Health”. HPSSR is a research-focused division of the department of family and community medicine (DFCM) that was founded in 2009. This division is comprised of DFCM researchers and the College’s Health Systems Research (HSR) group. This past year, HPSSR expanded to recruit two new faculty, Dr. Kimberly Hart, a clinical psychologist, and Dr. Manorama Khare, a public health researcher.

HPSSR members have conducted social science and public health research and community health assessments for over 20 years.

In this first newsletter, we highlight some of the research conducted by HPSSR researchers. There are informative articles on posttraumatic stress disorder and postpartum depression. We also highlight our annual campus Research Day where students, faculty, and researchers from affiliated institutions come together to display their scholarly work. We present Health Systems Research and our strong collaborative efforts with our county’s health department promote our continued efforts to partner with local community organizations.

I want to thank each of the contributors to this newsletter. HPSSR welcomes the opportunity to develop research synergy and partnership in our community.

Best wishes,

Sherry A. Falsetti, PhD
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HEALTH SYSTEMS RESEARCH

Health Systems Research is part of the division of health policy and social science research (HPSSR) within the department of family and community medicine. Reflecting the community orientation of the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford, Health Systems Research (HSR) has been around as long as the college itself. Since its founding more than four decades ago, Health Systems Research has assisted hundreds of organizations and initiated dozens of community research projects.

Specializing in social science topics, Health Systems Research is an applied research unit. That means HSR uses sound research principles and methodologies and applies them to the specific needs of particular organizations, most of which are health, social service and educational institutions. Recent studies have ranged from multiple sclerosis prevalence studies to feasibility of new health clinic sites and health professional training programs, from multi-assessment studies about overall quality of life and community needs to needs assessments for behavioral health or children's oral health. Survey projects have been just as varied and broad-based. Evaluation has become an important focus of HSR work in recent years, especially for assistance with evaluating performance and outcomes for federal and state grant projects. Click to see current and recent projects list.

Another service available through HSR is data access. Organizations are welcome to request specific data or ask questions about data topics. As part of this function, HSR staff offer on-site tutorials to guide persons through a host of publicly available websites to obtain local data.

HSR is based in Rockford but serves clients in a much broader geographic area encompassing most counties in the northern third of Illinois.
Investigating Prenatal Stress

In one recently published study (Nylen et al., 2013), Dr. (Nylen) Hart and her collaborators at the University of Iowa investigated the effects of prenatal maternal stress on mothers and babies during pregnancy and the postpartum period. This prospective longitudinal study followed more than 200 pregnant women from early pregnancy through childbirth to investigate potential risk factors (e.g. prenatal maternal stress, depression, anxiety) for adverse reproductive health outcomes, as well as factors such as social support that may protect against such adverse outcomes. Results of Dr. Hart’s research replicated the finding that clinically depressed women were more likely to have babies who weighed less, were born earlier, and had lower Apgar scores than non-depressed women. A novel contribution was that although social support from partners and social networks were not significant predictors of birth outcome, partner social support interacted with depression to predict gestational age and Apgar scores. In other words, depressed women who rated their partners as supporting them less frequently and adequately had babies who were born earlier and had lower Apgar scores than depressed mothers with higher perceived partner support. Thus, prenatal depression had a negative impact on reproductive outcomes, but more frequent and adequate social support from partners during pregnancy may lower the risk of adverse infant outcomes in depressed mothers.

The clinical implications of this study point to the possibility that interventions targeting depression or relationship functioning among pregnant women may reduce the negative impact of depression on infant outcomes. However, perinatal depression remains under detected, and the vast majority of women who are identified do not go on to receive treatment. In this regard, Dr. Hart has been involved in additional research including studies examining rates of depressive symptoms and factors associated with treatment-seeking among rural perinatal women. She has also conducted a study utilizing clinical information collected during routine health care to examine predictors of treatment utilization and outcomes in perinatal women. She looks forward to conducting future studies focused on the identification of perinatal depression among perinatal women seen in primary care. In addition, she is interested in acceptability and preference for various treatments, and their impact on patient adherence and retention in primary care. The ultimate goal of her work is to improve clinical care for depressed perinatal women, with the hope that such care will lead to improved outcomes for mothers, babies, and families.

Recent publications


Multiple Channel Exposure Therapy – Cognitive Behavioral Treatment for PTSD

Dr. Falsetti, PhD, developed Multiple Channel Exposure Therapy (MCET) based on her observation that patients felt they could not participate in trauma-focused treatment because of fear of having a panic attack and results of a study she conducted on the prevalence of panic attacks in patients with PTSD. MCET is a cognitive behavioral treatment that was designed to treat both panic attacks and PTSD in people who have experienced traumatic events. Falsetti and Resnick (1997) found that approximately 69% of women seeking treatment for PTSD were also suffering from panic attacks. Many had never shared their physical symptoms with their therapists because the symptoms were mainly physical, so they thought something physical, such as a heart attack, was causing the symptoms. This often resulted in unnecessary ER visits. Part of the therapy for PTSD involves talking about and re-experiencing past traumas, which can trigger panic attacks for people who suffer from them. Falsetti tested this treatment with a small pilot group, then applied and received funding from NIMH to further test the treatment with women. She wrote both patient and therapist manuals to be used in the testing, which have since been used to train other mental health care providers in using MCET. The treatment addresses physical, cognitive and behavioral symptoms of PTSD and panic attacks and lasts for 12 weeks. Since its development, it has been used successfully with both men and women. Treatment begins with education about trauma and reactions to it. Exercises mimic some of the panic symptoms in a very controlled environment to help patients get used to different sensations and become less fearful of them. The cognitive component of treatment helps trauma survivors to develop skills to evaluate their thought processes and recognize how trauma might have affected their beliefs. In the last phase of treatment, patients begin doing activities that are not dangerous, but that they may have been avoiding due to either fear about having panic attacks or because of trauma related associations. Falsetti et al (2008) found MCET to be an effective treatment for PTSD and panic attacks. Results from this study indicated that of women who completed treatment, 96% met criteria for good end-state functioning for PTSD and 71% achieved good end state functioning for panic attacks. The decrease in symptoms seem to hold long-term, with 6 month post treatment data indicating that 88% of women no longer met criteria for PTSD based on the Clinician Administered PTSD Scale and 50% reporting no panic attacks and those having panic reporting reduced frequency and severity of those attacks. MCET is currently being tested with veterans who have PTSD by Dr. Ellen Teng, a psychologist at the Houston VA, with Dr. Falsetti serving as a consultant on this study.

Selected publications relevant to MCET and recent publications:


James Scholar Program

The James Scholar designation is given to students formally identified by their colleges as honor students. They are granted certain privileges to facilitate their education. Criteria for admission, retention and graduation are established by the individual colleges. The James Scholar Program within the College of Medicine was established in 1967 and the James Scholar Program at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford began in 1972. Since that time there have been 71 students who have completed the program in Rockford.

The selection criteria used in Rockford are as follows:
1. Academic excellence. Application is limited to students in the upper 25% of the entering M2 class.
2. A high level of maturity and self-motivation.
3. A desire to pursue an individual curriculum and intellectual objectives without the constraints of the regular curriculum.
4. Interest in pursuing problems in greater depth than possible in conventional studies.
5. Acceptance of the criteria for graduation from the James Scholar Program.

A maximum of $2,500 is available to each student to complete their research project. These funds can be used for project-specific costs, the purchase of products or services available through Media Services and to support any travel and/or registration expenses associated with the presentation of the findings of the James Scholar project at professional meetings.

James Scholars present their projects at the annual research day at the University of Illinois Rockford.
Next year will mark the 20th anniversary of Research Day. We will celebrate twenty years of research that has fostered creativity, discovery, scientific inquiry, and sharing of findings on our campus. Research Day highlights the research efforts of trainees and faculty on campus and at affiliated institutions. Researchers comprise students in the College of Medicine, College of Nursing, College of Pharmacy, Medical Biotechnology Graduate Program, Summer Medical Research Training Program, and Summer Science Program; university faculty; and scientists from affiliated institutions. Student trainees are especially encouraged to attend so that they are exposed to the vast research taking place on the Rockford campus and regional institutions.

History of Research Day
Research Day at the Rockford campus began in April 1995 and has been an annual event since then. The event began as an opportunity for researchers, primarily basic scientists, to display their research in the main lobby of the campus and in 1997 became a day long event under the leadership of research committee chair, Dr. K. Ramaswamy. It is now a structured research forum including: (1) researchers formally presenting their posters on display including discussion of their research; (2) an invited keynote speaker discussing cutting-edge research; (3) company and industry representation and sponsorship for the forum; and (4) a roundtable discussion between campus biomedical researchers who meet with other scientists from affiliated institutions to foster collaboration.

2014 Research Day
Research Day has evolved into one of the most anticipated research forums on our campus. For the past two years, Dr. Alesia Hawkins has served as chair of the research committee who hosts Research Day. Since her appointment, the event has expanded to include research in the areas of social science, public health, nursing, clinical research, and medical education. Trainees representing research programs on the Rockford campus (James Scholar, rural medical education, pharmacy, medical biotechnology) provide oral presentations of their research. This past year, we had over 60 poster presentations. We now provide the opportunity for trainees to present their research orally to forum attendees. Currently, there are 12 sponsorships supporting the research day program and awards. This past research day, a wide-range of research was showcased including the study of EGFR and c-Met TKI resistance, hypertension screening in rural communities, assessing risk factors of uterine leiomyomas, and healthy lifestyles in 5th graders.

Dr. Mrinalini C. Rao, professor of physiology and biophysics and professor of medicine from the University of Illinois at Chicago provided the keynote address. Dr. Rao presented her research on the molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying hormonal and neurotransmitter regulation of physiological processes related to gastrointestinal tract. She described her experience as an academic researcher and discussed how trainees and early career researchers can have a successful and productive academic career. Dr. Rao also facilitated a small group discussion with trainees about her research and career trajectory. To learn more about Research Day and 2014 awardees go to http://rockford.medicine.uic.edu/Research/19th_annual_research_day

(continued)
Reactions to participation in Research Day

“Research Day at U of I College of Medicine Rockford was a great experience that allowed us to share our research with fellow colleagues, professors, and other medical professionals. It also allowed us to explore many different areas of research in various fields of science and medicine. I was very grateful to be a part of this special day!”

Abby Menke, Rockford University
Winner of the 2014 U of I College of Medicine at Rockford Office of the Regional Dean’s Innovation in Basic Science Research Award

“I really enjoy talking about my research. The whole process was a great experience and I appreciate the opportunity. I am glad to have been a part of the James Scholar Program. I had a great experience presenting my work to a diverse group of researchers and attendees.”

Kunal Patel, MD, Class of 2014
U of I College of Medicine at Rockford
2014 James Scholar Award Winner
As an integral part of the area's health landscape, Winnebago County Health Department seeks to understand and improve the health of local residents. In the early days, that meant attention to infectious disease, sanitation and hygiene. Over the decades, the health department has evolved to encompassing services that cover the vast array of health concerns at all stages of life from healthy babies to chronic disease prevention.

In its mission to promote health and prevent disease, Winnebago County Health Department has looked to Health Systems Research (HSR) to assess community needs, determine the feasibility of potential new projects, evaluate programming, and measure customer satisfaction – a relationship that has existed since HSR's founding in the early 1970s.

During the past decade, Health Systems Research and Winnebago County Health Department have worked together for projects as varied as dental health, health disparities, neighborhood safety, pandemic flu planning and school-based health services. The oral health assessment involved three surveys, each geared toward a specific population, mothers of infants/children, seniors, and local dentists. Safety concerns were examined and addressed through annual surveys to residents in Rockford's Kishwaukee and Ellis Street neighborhoods via a project called Weed and Seed. The Blackhawk Park School-Linked Health Center got off the ground following a feasibility study completed by HSR. The health department has also relied on HSR's expertise to collect and analyze local data for health priority selection for Illinois Planning for Local Area Needs (IPLAN) and annual reports.

As a foremost collaborator on community-wide efforts, Winnebago County Health Department has used HSR expertise for the multi-part Healthy Community studies, Green Communities Survey, Cherry Valley Regional Drug-Free Coalition, the Violence Prevention Collaborative's efforts to tackle bullying at Rockford middle schools, and the Minority Health Survey. The latter of these established baseline data about health problems experienced by the local minority populations and launched the creation of the Black Male Health initiative at the Winnebago County Health Department.

Says J. Maichle Bacon, retired public health administrator for Winnebago County Health Department, “I value the on-going partnership between public health and Health Systems Research. It benefits both organizations by growing research opportunities while at the same time enhancing health outcomes and efficiencies. The health department also appreciates the relationship with the department of family and community medicine, particularly because our three most recent medical directors have been faculty members of that department. These close interactions truly demonstrate how we work together for a healthier community.”

Joining public health practice and expertise about community data brings together two organizations to produce a healthier and better served community.
Divya Bhatt, MD

Dr. Divya Bhatt is in her third year of residency at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is completing her residency in internal medicine and will specialize in gastroenterology.

“Why research? As a busy medical student, it’s hard to make time for extra-curricular activities. I chose to conduct research at U of I College of Medicine at Rockford for a number of reasons. I wanted to learn more about formulating a project and implementing it (mostly because I wanted to be involved in research/academics in the future) and I thought it made me a more competitive candidate for residency. In addition, I liked the idea of choosing a question, one that I was interested in answering, and figuring out how to investigate the topic. I think that the James Scholar Program and presenting at Research Day helped me immensely in all regards. Most importantly, I learned to think critically about research and create projects that were feasibly accomplished during residency. Now applying for a competitive fellowship, having research experience gives me something to talk about and get excited about! Through my research experience, I realized that I really like quality improvement; when the process occurs correctly, you can really make an impact in a short period of time. In summary, research can be fun, especially if you are working on a project you created!”

Divya Bhatt, MD, U of I College of Medicine at Rockford, Class of 2012, James Scholar Program
Sherry Falsetti, PhD
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Sherry A. Falsetti, PhD, is the director of the division of health policy and social science research, professor and the associate head of the department of family and community medicine (DFCM). She is also a licensed clinical psychologist and recently completed a certification in health coaching with an emphasis on holistic nutrition.

Dr. Falsetti's research and clinical practice focus on the physical and mental health effects of trauma on women and the treatment of post traumatic stress disorder and panic attacks. She developed Multiple Channel Exposure Therapy (MCET) for post traumatic stress disorder and panic attacks, and is known for the Modified PTSD Symptom Scale, which has been translated to 17 different languages and has been used in at least 35 countries around the world. Dr. Falsetti is currently working with NCI Pearson to test a web-based tool to identify mental health disorders in a primary care setting, revising her treatment to include mindfulness components and address holistic health, and serving as a consultant on a study testing her treatment with veterans at the Houston VA. She hopes to begin a study of the effectiveness of health coaching for women who have comorbid PTSD and chronic disease in a primary care setting.

Dr. Falsetti earned her doctoral degree from University of Missouri-St. Louis and a post-doctoral fellowship at the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Medical University of South Carolina, where she was also a faculty member for 10 years. She has been with the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford for the past 11 years and during her career has won numerous awards, including the Faculty Scientist-Practitioner Award, Golden Apple Teaching Award, a Professional Contribution Recognition Award for professional contribution in the aftermath of September 11th from the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy, and the YWCA Women of Achievement Professions Award. Dr. Falsetti has had research funding from the National Institutes of Health, Center for Disease Control, Department of Defense, and the Illinois Department of Public Health among others.

Areas of Interest
- Treatment of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental and physical health problems associated with trauma exposure
- Influence of culture on doctor-patient communication
- Identification of trauma and PTSD in primary care
- Health coaching
Kimberly Hart, PhD  
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Kimberly Hart, PhD, is the director of behavioral sciences for the family medicine residency program at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford. She also serves as an assistant professor in the department of family and community medicine and is a licensed clinical psychologist with emphasis in perinatal depression, anxiety disorders and adjustment issues.

Dr. Hart’s research focuses on mood and anxiety disorders during pregnancy and the postpartum period. She is interested in the effects of depression on mothers and babies, risk factors for maternal depression and anxiety, and effectiveness of treatment for perinatal depression. She is available to conduct community presentations on perinatal depression and the importance of early recognition and intervention.

Dr. Hart earned her doctoral degree in clinical psychology from the University of Iowa and completed a post-doctoral fellowship in the department of psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical School. Prior to joining the College of Medicine, Dr. Hart was an assistant professor and clinic director in the department of psychology at Idaho State University, where she was named Clinical Faculty Member of the Year. She is a member of several national organizations including the North American Society for Psychosocial Obstetrics and Gynecology, the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine and the American Psychological Association.

Areas of Interest
• Mood and anxiety disorders during pregnancy and the postpartum period
• Effects of depression on mothers and babies
• Risk factors for maternal depression and anxiety
• Effectiveness of treatment for perinatal depression
• Identification and management of perinatal depression in primary care

Alesia Hawkins, PhD  
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Alesia Hawkins, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the department of family and community medicine at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford. She serves as the director of research in the department. Dr. Hawkins also serves as chair of the campus research committee. Dr. Hawkins’ research area focuses on the study of interpersonal violence and the psychological, emotional, and behavioral consequences of victimization. Her research also includes examination of healthcare delivery to violence exposed individuals and improving the identification and response to victims of violence within the context of primary care.

Dr. Hawkins has been the recipient of numerous awards in recognition of her research, clinical work, and teaching including the Robert Magwood, Jr Award for Outstanding Service to Crime Victims and 2011 Rockford YWCA Women of Achievement, Professions Award. She has been awarded grants and scholarships from the National Institute of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, University of Illinois, and the Medical University of South Carolina. She has published peer-reviewed articles and book chapters related to trauma and present on violence exposure and mental health at national and local conferences.

Prior to joining the College of Medicine, she completed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences, at the Medical University of South Carolina.

Areas of Interest
• Identification of family and interpersonal violence in primary care
• Mental health disparities among ethnic/racial minorities and impoverished communities
• Community violence and homicide survivorship
• Violence prevention research
• Workshops and presentations on adolescent and adult violence exposure
Manorama M. Khare, PhD
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Manorama M. Khare, PhD, is a research assistant professor at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford with extensive experience in research related to underserved populations, women's health and diversity in higher education. Her technical expertise includes program evaluation, planning and implementation of community-based programs, quantitative and qualitative research methods, quasi experimental research designs, survey development and multivariate data analysis.

The focus of her research has been reducing cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk in women using behavioral lifestyle change interventions. She is currently the lead evaluator for the Illinois WISE-WOMAN program and CVD risk reduction program for underinsured and uninsured women across the state. For the past six years, she has served as co-investigator on a collaborative effort of the UIC National Center for Excellence in Women’s Health and the Illinois Department of Health to improve the cardiovascular risk profiles for adult women living in rural southern Illinois.

Dr. Khare earned her doctoral degree in public health from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Prior to this position, she was a senior research specialist at the Center for Research on Women and Gender and the National Center for Excellence in Women’s Health at UIC.

Areas of Interest
• Women’s Health
• Rural Health
• Behavioral Lifestyle Change Interventions
• Use of mHealth to promote behavior change
• Program Evaluation
• Planning and Implementation of Community Programs
• Diversity in Higher Education

Michelle Bunyer
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Michelle Bunyer has been a research data analyst for Health Systems Research since 1998. She graduated from the University of Missouri with a MA in clinical psychology with a focus on children. Prior to joining Health Systems Research, she worked as a study coordinator at the Rush Institute on Aging in Chicago. Bunyer coordinated a study of caregivers of Alzheimer’s disease patients and a study of nutrition in an older adult community population and has been an evaluator for the Rockford Public Schools’ 21st CCLC After School Program Grants for the last 10 years.

Areas of Interest
• After school program evaluation
• Healthy community surveys
• Community needs assessments
• Survey research
• Program evaluation
Deborah Lischwe
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Deborah Lischwe is the associate director of Health Systems Research a division of HPSSR. She has extensive background in community health and health system planning. In recent years, she has assisted more than a dozen county health departments with “healthy community” studies.

Ms. Lischwe earned a master of science degree from the University of Cincinnati in Community Health with a dual emphasis in health planning and epidemiology. Her graduate study was the outgrowth of Peace Corps work and breast cancer epidemiology research. Prior to her present position, Ms. Lischwe worked as a planner in the hospital/health system setting for 18 years. Most of her professional publications address ways to help organizations understand and improve community health. In addition to her membership in several professional organizations, she assists numerous school and community groups in a volunteer capacity.

Areas of Interest
- Community health indicators and needs
- Health disparities
- Health system analysis
- Survey research
- County and small area prevalence estimates, incidence rates and other health indicators
- Consultation on health-related activities

James A. Powers, Jr., LCSW
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James A. Powers, Jr., LCSW, has been part of Health Systems Research since 2008. He previously served in professional and administrative capacities for a wide variety of not-for-profit organizations that provided counseling and family services, employee assistance, hospital outpatient psychiatry, services for child abuse and neglect, and child development and disability services. He either serves or has served on a number of not-for-profit and foundation boards. At Health Systems Research, his primary work focuses on healthy community studies and mental health program evaluation and needs assessment. His projects include assessments for a variety of Mental Health 708 Boards, such as DeKalb County, Oak Park, and Hanover Township, and evaluations for such projects as for the children’s mental health system of care project operating in Carroll, Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside Counties and funded by the Illinois Children’s Healthcare Foundation.
Debra Goodwin is an administrative assistant at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford. She provides administrative support to the director of the Division of Health Policy and Social Science Research (HPSSR) and to the chair of the James Scholar Research Program (JS). Debra provides support to the Division of HPSSR through facilitation of meeting arrangements, preparation of meeting agendas, recording and transcribing minutes. For the JS program, Debra maintains a program calendar, manages a web-based learning management system, creates M2, M3 and M4 student timelines identifying student assignment submission and meeting dates, tracks students’ compliance with program requirements, and coordinates meetings between students and JS committee members.

Debra is proficient in the Microsoft Office software package (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Publisher); attended Edgewood College in Madison, Wis., Highland Community College in Freeport, Ill., and Rock Valley College in Rockford, Ill., where her focus was in business management curriculum.

Vicki Cummings and Sharon Myers provide administrative support to Health Systems Research (HSR). Their primary responsibilities include word processing, data entry and preparation of reports for research studies conducted by HSR. They each hold an associate degree in office technology from Rock Valley College.
Recent Publication from HPSSR Researchers

- Hawkins, A.O., Rabenhorst-Bell, M.M., & Hetzel-Riggin, M.D. (Accepted Manuscript). Exploring Racially Diverse College Students’ Perspective on Child Discipline: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*.
- Zimmermann K., Khare M.M., Koch A., Geller S.A. Accepted August 2014. Training Intervention Study Participants to Disseminate Health Messages to the Community: A New Model for Translation of Clinical Research to the Community. Accepted, *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*.