A New Vision for Research

The past decade has brought changes to biomedical research that have affected all sectors of the research enterprise, from academic centers and university hospitals to community-based health care organizations such as Guthrie.

Several forces have driven these changes. Rapid growth in biomedical research has been fueled by massive government-funded activities such as the human genome project; and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a major source of research funding, has introduced a new roadmap designed to change the entire research paradigm.

The goal of the NIH roadmap is to translate research into practice more rapidly than through the traditional approaches. One of the major components of the roadmap is the development of translational research, a new research model built on close collaborative relationships between university centers conducting basic research and health care providers who can implement new treatments and preventive measures.

This paradigm shift is a perfect fit for Guthrie. “As an integrated community-based health care system, Guthrie is uniquely positioned to be a leader in translational research,” said Robert Bienkowski, PhD, Guthrie’s Director of Research and Clinical Innovation.

In consultation with Guthrie physicians, staff and leadership, Dr. Bienkowski has developed a strategic plan for research at Guthrie that builds on the organization’s clinical strengths and expertise in conducting clinical research. Guthrie’s highly qualified research nurses, coordinators and regulatory specialists conduct more than 100 clinical trials sponsored by pharmaceutical and medical device companies. The organization’s ability to offer clinical trials benefits patients, advances the body of medical knowledge, and differentiates Guthrie from other regional health care providers. Another strength is Guthrie’s well-established Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees the rights and welfare of research participants. The IRB is made up of scientists, clinicians and community members appointed by the Guthrie Healthcare System Board of Directors.

Translational research at Guthrie will address questions that arise directly from our clinical practice and the health care needs of the communities we serve. Research projects initiated by Guthrie physicians have resulted in the establishment of evidence-based best practices within Guthrie. Shared with larger clinical networks, they are good examples of how translational research is a two-way collaboration between large research institutions and community-based health care systems.

“The highest priority in the strategic plan for research is to foster investigator-initiated original research,” Dr. Bienkowski stated. These types of projects are within the scope of Guthrie’s role as envisioned by the new NIH roadmap and have the potential to facilitate translating new findings into clinical practice.

“Supporting investigator-initiated research projects and participating in regional and national research networks integrates well with Guthrie’s educational and professional development programs,” Dr. Bienkowski added. He remarked further that particular efforts will be made to encourage residents to become involved in research. “During the past academic year, some of our residents have developed very interesting research proposals that we have been able to support.”

Most of the funding for the NIH roadmap initiatives is directed toward large university-based research centers, and funds will be
available to Guthrie researchers through participation in regional and national networks. However, philanthropic support is needed for the studies that are initiated at Guthrie. Guthrie’s Resource Development Department will work with the Guthrie Foundation to develop this support and make it available to investigators through a program of “mini-grants.” According to Dr. Bienkowski, small amounts of funding can have large effects, such as providing pilot data to support grant applications to external funding agencies, and demonstrating the feasibility to organize large-scale studies. A defining feature of the new grants program will be its responsiveness to investigators. “It’s impossible to schedule good ideas for research, but it is important to be able to respond rapidly and enthusiastically when they occur,” Dr. Bienkowski explained.

The current list of proposed Guthrie research projects offers some exciting possibilities, including studies originating in cardiovascular services, dentistry, surgery, rehabilitation services, nursing and emergency medicine. These studies will have an impact on developing best practices within their respective specialties and several have the potential to make important contributions to health care on a national scale. Furthermore, implementation of the new electronic health record system will open entirely new avenues for research at Guthrie, especially in primary care settings.

The world of biomedical research has changed dramatically during the past 10 years, and Guthrie has an important place in the new research landscape. For more information about the clinical research projects under way at Guthrie, contact Dr. Bienkowski at bienkowski_robert@guthrie.org, or call him at 570-882-4656.

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