

Geriatrics / Gerontology and the VA Mission

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The Department of Veterans Affairs is strongly committed to improving the health care of our aging veteran population. World War II and Korean Conflict veterans are almost all elderly and aging fast. Even Viet Nam era veterans are now reaching the age of retirement – and of an increasing burden of health problems. One of VA's principal approaches to improving the health of these elderly veterans is through its establishment of Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Centers (GRECCs). There are 21 GRECCs with varying areas of specialty interest spanning the field of medicine. Each GRECC embodies the classic academic triad of research, education, and clinical excellence.

The GRECC at VA Puget Sound focuses on the related topics of neurodegenerative disease and dementing disorders, including studies of genetics and metabolism, and neuro-endocrinology of aging covering glucose metabolism, andrology and prostate issues. My own interests are in epidemiology of dementia providing insights into cause, mechanism, and possible prevention. Dr. Thomas Bird, this year's winner of the VA's coveted William S. Middleton Award for lifetime excellence in research, is one of the nation's leading clinical neurogeneticists. His group has assembled large pedigrees that have then been analyzed by the laboratory of Dr. Gerard Schellenberg (GRECC Associate Director for Research) and UW collaborators to find genes for Hereditary Cerebellar Ataxia, Familial Alzheimer's Disease, and heritable forms of Fronto-Temporal Dementia. Dr. Suzanne Craft is the GRECC Associate Director for Education. Her innovative research on the role of insulin, insulin resistance, and insulin sensitizing agents has recently achieved international recognition as a promising new approach to understanding both the mechanisms and the possible treatments of Alzheimer's disease. Dr. Craft also directs a productive clinical and training program in cognitive disorders and neuropsychology. Dr. Alvin Matsumoto is GRECC Associate Director for Clinical issues. He and GRECC investigator Dr. Steven Plymate are both distinguished geriatric physicians working in the forefront of research on endocrine changes in aging men, testosterone deficiency, and prostate cancer. Other talented investigators are making new discoveries on aging-related muscle wasting (sarcopenia – Dr. LeBris Quinn), the molecular biology of Alzheimer's disease (Dr. David Cook), end-of-life ethical issues (Dr. Robert Pearlman) and several other key topics.