Palliative Care Grants Fund Quality of Life Research

Atlanta 2007/05/01 -The American Cancer Society and the National Palliative Care Research Center (NPCRC) are awarding $1.5 million in research grants to researchers at ten institutions for studies aimed at reducing suffering for seriously ill patients and their family caregivers. The studies will be conducted over the next two years.

“These grants will bring much-needed research dollars to a field that has become an increasingly important part of patient care, but for which federal funding is inadequate,” said Jerome Yates, MD, vice president of research for the American Cancer Society. “This collaborative parallel initiative with the NPCRC has the potential to make significant contributions towards reducing suffering caused by cancer and other serious illnesses.”

Palliative care is the medical specialty focused on the relief of suffering and support for the best possible quality of life for people living with serious illness. It is an interdisciplinary field focusing on patients with multiple chronic illnesses, functional impairment, and a high burden of family caregiving responsibilities. It is not dependent on prognosis.

The new collaborative initiative between the American Cancer Society and the National Palliative Care Research Center is designed to support clinician investigators conducting patient-oriented research in palliative care in hopes of bringing more funding from federal agencies, which have supported some research in palliative care, but for whom it is not a priority area. Pilot data results are typically needed before a federal agency will consider funding a research project.

"One of the major barriers to reducing suffering for people living with a serious illness like cancer has been the lack of research funding directed towards palliative care interventions.” said NPCRC Director R. Sean Morrison, MD, who is also professor of Palliative Care, Geriatrics and Medicine at Mount School of Medicine. “The goal of this initiative is to redress this lack of funding and to support research scientists who will advance the field of palliative care. The strategic investment by the American Cancer Society, the Emily Davie and Joseph S. Kornfeld, Olive Branch, and Brookdale Foundations in this program is exemplary of how private philanthropy can address critical social needs, fill gaps in government funding, and stimulates change that improves care for all Americans."

The Grantees:

NPCRC Pilot Project Support Grant Recipients

- University of Pittsburgh School Medicine - Robert Arnold, MD, professor of medicine and director of the Palliative Care Fellowship Training Program, will examine ways to improve the ability of intensive care physicians-in-training (critical care fellows) to communicate effectively and empathetically about end-of-life topics.
- City of Hope National Medical Center, Duarte, California - Marcia Grant, DNSc, RN, professor and director of research will conduct a pilot study that will use the treatment advance of intra-peritoneal (IP) chemotherapy for patients with advanced ovarian cancer to demonstrate how disease focused cancer treatment can be best accomplished in concert with palliative care.
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill - Sheryl Zimmerman, PhD, professor of social work and senior research scientist and co-director for the Program on Aging, Disability and Long-Term Care of the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research will examine the suitability of measurement scales used to assess the quality of dying in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

American Cancer Society Pilot Project Support Grant Recipients

- University of Colorado at Denver Health Sciences Center - Kristin M. Kilbourn, PhD, research associate professor in the Department of Psychology, will examine a new and innovative counseling intervention to improve psychosocial functioning and quality of life among elderly caregivers of cancer patients enrolled in home-based hospice care.
- University of California, Davis - Frederick J. Meyers, MD, professor and chair of Internal Medicine, will evaluate a palliative care model and system of care for Latino patients living with a serious cancer diagnosis.
- Mount Sinai School of Medicine - Judith E. Nelson, MD, JD, associate professor of medicine/Pulmonary and Critical Care, will research ways to improve care of cancer patients by informing an integrative palliative care intervention for those with Stage III non-small cell lung cancer and their families.
- Harvard Medical School - Joanne Wolfe, MD, staff physician in the Department of Pediatric Oncology at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute /Children’s Hospital Boston, will follow how children with advanced cancer are feeling by using a handheld computer tablet. The findings will be used to improve communication between families and caregivers to reduce the experience of suffering in children with advanced cancer.
- Brown University School of Medicine – Joan M. Teno, MD, MS, is a professor of community health and medicine and associate director of the Center for Gerontology and Health Care Research. The overall objective of Dr. Teno’s research project is to improve the quality of care for cancer patients referred to hospice in the last weeks of life.

NPCRC Junior Faculty Career Development Award Recipients

- Duke University Medical Center - Kimberly Johnson, MD, MHS, assistant professor of medicine, Division of Geriatrics, has a strong interest in palliative care in African American communities. Her proposed research project will examine racial disparities in hospice use and will allow her to determine which policies and programs are associated with greater service to African Americans.
- Harvard Medical School - Christina Ullrich, MD, a fellow in Pediatric Palliative Care at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute /Children's Hospital Boston, is dedicated to improving care of children with advanced illness who are at high risk for physical and emotional suffering. Dr. Ullrich will examine symptom management in children with advanced cancer, specifically focusing on the symptom of fatigue which causes significant suffering but is often under-treated in children.

"The quality of all of the applicants for these awards gives us a great deal of optimism about the future of palliative care," said Dr. Diane E. Meier, Chair of the NPCRC's Scientific Advisory Council, Director of the Center to Advance Palliative Care, and the Hertzberg Palliative Care Institute at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "If the best and the brightest from the interdisciplinary health professions continue to be attracted to palliative care research, we will have accomplished our goal of building a strong and sustainable field of medicine for our most seriously ill patients."

Further details about the NPCRC and ACS 2007 Grantees and their research projects are available at http://www.npcrc.org/grantees/.

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