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For Immediate Release
April 10, 2014

Community and UCLA/Rand Research Team Wins Prestigious Award for Translational Science Efforts to Improve Depression Care in Low-income Areas

A team of community leaders and researchers from UCLA and RAND has been awarded the 2014 Joint Team Science Award in recognition of a 10-year effort to conduct community engaged, population-based translational science to improve care for depression in low-income areas.

The Joint Team Science Award, given by the Association for Clinical and Translational Science and the American Federation for Medical Research, was established to acknowledge the growing importance of interdisciplinary teams to translate research discoveries into clinical applications to achieve public health impact. The award will be presented on April 10, 2014, at the association's annual meeting in Washington, D.C.

The UCLA/RAND and community translational research team included interdisciplinary scientists and area stakeholders from South Los Angeles, downtown L.A. and Hollywood working in partnership, contributing expertise to develop a collaborative approach to science development and implementation, as well as an evidence basis for the added value of community engagement and partnership.

The team included the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and 40 other health and advocacy agencies, including Healthy African American Families II, QueenCare Health and Faith Partnership and Behavioral Health Services. More than 100 academic and community leaders, such as ministers and representatives from child welfare agencies, barbershops and beauty salons, food banks and homeless shelters, participated in the project, said principal investigator Dr. Kenneth Wells, a senior scientist at RAND and a professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA.

“It’s absolutely wonderful to get an award that recognizes the efforts of so many people. It really does take a village to affect change,” said Wells, who also is a professor-in-residence in the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. “We showed that with community leaders and scientists working together we can improve mental and physical health and reduce homelessness, as well as provide relief for those suffering from depression.”

Participating scientist Dr. Bowen Chung, an assistant professor-in-residence of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA and an adjunct scientist at RAND, said the study on depression may be the first ever to show community engagement can provide “measurable added value.”

“We were able to show that high quality science and high quality community engagement are not mutually exclusive endeavors,” Chung said. “We were also able to show that, when everyone in a community works together to address a health issue like depression, we can learn how to develop new effective and innovative approaches to provide support for people with depression that healthcare systems and doctors could never develop by themselves.”

The UCLA/RAND effort spans three different projects over the 10-year period, including Witness for Wellness, the NIMH-funded Partnered Research Center for Quality Care and Community Partners in Care. The Community Partners in Care executive council was nominated for the honor by Dr. Eugene Washington, vice chancellor for health sciences and dean of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, and Michael Rich, president and chief executive officer of RAND.

“This project made it safe to talk about depression in my community,” said study co-principal investigator Loretta Jones, chief executive officer of Healthy African American Families II, a non-profit health advocacy organization that works to improve the health outcomes of African American, Latino and Korean communities in Los Angeles County. “It was successful because it was not done ‘on,’ ‘to,’ or ‘for,’ but ‘with’ the community.”

Pluscedia Williams, a member of the Community Partners in Care executive council, said participating in the project was eye opening, shedding light on her own depression and empowering her to face it.

“It changed my life because I’ve learned about my depression and I’m not ashamed to talk about it anymore,” she said. “Because of everything that I’ve learned about how to manage my depression, I now have hope.”

The project was not only eye opening for Williams. Many of the depression sufferers the team was trying to help found it revelatory, said Andrea Jones, a staff member for Healthy African American Families II.

“I remember when we were going through what depression was all about with the community and when you looked in people’s faces, you could literally see a light bulb going off when they realized that what they had was depression,” Jones said. “People’s lives were changed because they were able to learn about depression in a safe space.”

Scientist Paul Koegel, associate director of RAND Health and a study co-investigator, characterized the project as “truly unusual in the extent to which they achieved authentic partnership.”

“Many teams of academic and community partners profess a commitment to partnership, but fail when it comes to the really important things - sharing resources equitably, co-leading in the truest sense of the word and collaborating as equals during every single project phase,” Koegel said. “In this project, participants not only ‘talked the talk,’ they ‘walked the walk.’ It’s wonderful to see this recognized and acknowledged.”

Marvin Southard, director of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, said the award “validates that really listening to the community not only produces better programs, but also better science.”

“This project will be the model that Los Angeles County will use to integrate primary care and mental health care everywhere in the county,” he said.

Community Partners in care and Witness for Wellness were supported by the National Institute of Mental Health. Other supporters included the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Library of Medicine, the California Community Foundation, the Patient Centered Outcomes Research and the UCLA Clinical and Translational Science Institute, which provides the infrastructure to bring UCLA innovations and resources to bear on the health needs of Los Angeles and the nation.