



## Leaders' Update

A message from Vanessa B. Sheppard, Ph.D., associate director for disparities research

Dear colleagues,

It's been a little more than a year since my last update, in which I discussed our unique opportunity to leverage Massey's diverse catchment area and status as a Safety Net Hospital to advance high-priority disparities and minority health research. This collaborative, transdisciplinary and community focused research is a critical component of Massey's Vision 2021 strategic plan, and I'm excited to say we've made significant progress.

Establishing Massey's Office of Health Equity and Disparities Research (OHEDR) was an important first step in focusing our resources. Our office is working to not only leverage and enhance the skills found here at Massey, but also to integrate and align the resources of VCU and VCU Health as we work toward a common goal of making positive impacts in our communities. Since founded, our office has worked to increase collaborations with partner organizations in order to expand our reach into other parts of Virginia, engage more Massey research members in disparities research in new and unique ways and make community based research an integral component of our education and outreach sites.

One of the ways we are working to encourage collaboration and involvement in disparities research among Massey's research members is by establishing an annual OHEDR Retreat. We held our inaugural retreat in February, during which an update was provided on our efforts over the last year and a half and featured a keynote presentation by Rick Kitchens, Ph.D., associate director of health disparities at City of Hope Comprehensive Cancer Center and an expert in biological and genetic cancer disparities. The retreat was well attended, and Dr. Kitchens challenged us to consider examining disparities related to ancestry from a genetic perspective in addition to collecting racial demographic data from study participants. Our diverse catchment area affords us a lot of opportunities to do things most centers can't when it comes to ancestry, and I feel we are well positioned to make significant contributions to enhance our knowledge of the biological and genetic components of cancer in diverse populations while still addressing access and behavioral factors.

One encouraging development is our strengthened partnership with Hampton University. We recently submitted an NIH/NCI P20 grant application to assess the feasibility of our institutions partnering on a center that would focus on health disparities research, community outreach and the training of underrepresented minority investigators in cancer disparities research. We

proposed two research projects. The first focuses on disparities in prostate cancer, particularly around treatment toxicity, and the other is focused on examining biological and genetic markers in patients with triple negative breast cancer to inform the development of targeted therapies. The third component of the grant provides resources to train underrepresented minority investigators both at Hampton and at Massey, as well as training community members on cancer research to help in public education and clinical trial enrollment. This grant took about a year of planning and culminated in several published projects. We will be pursuing these ideas and this partnership with Hampton University regardless of the outcome of the application.

We have several other projects focused on both biospecimen collection and genetic counseling in order to establish effective behavioral interventions for minority populations. One such NIH-funded project involves testing the clinical utility of an artificial intelligence tool to increase genetic counseling among African American and Latina breast cancer patients at Massey and Georgetown. Another NIH-funded project aimed at understanding lower rates of biospecimen donation among African American patients was recently published in the *Journal of Cancer Survivorship*.

In addition to our focused disparities research, we are also working to increase cross-cutting disparities research across all of Massey's programs. We recently engaged Ross Mikkelsen, Ph.D., to examine differences in radiation toxicity among African American men, and all of Massey's program leaders have been charged with incorporating a disparities component into their research when possible. We are also working to train minority investigators in disparities research, and will be requesting diversity supplements in future grant submissions to fund these efforts.

Another priority for the OHEDR is to centralize and enhance research at Massey's outreach sites in Danville, Lawrenceville, Petersburg and, soon, in the East End of Henrico. We had our first retreat with our outreach staff in October of last year, and have been working to better integrate their efforts and talents into our Cancer Prevention and Control program. We have made amazing strides in increasing access to health information and resources in these communities, and it is time we leverage those efforts to better support our research mission. One of our priorities at our outreach sites is establishing a research registry of event participants to identify disparities and unique health needs in these communities. I am also serving on the steering committee charged with implementing VCU's Health Equities Plan, which strives to make an impact on the social determinants of health in our communities. Through these efforts, our office is working to align the goals of this plan with Massey's cancer prevention and control goals and objectives. A future outcome will be a new community engagement center incorporated into the East End Initiative. The center will be staffed by Massey's educational staff and provide programming similar to Massey's Healthy Living and Learning Center in Petersburg, which has already made an incredible impact on its community.

Moving forward, my office will be working on identifying external sources of funding for our research activities at outreach sites. We're in the process of collecting pilot data needed to

support applications for multi-year, peer-reviewed funding. We are also striving to build our capacity for cancer care delivery research. We have a lot of potential to develop projects and partnerships that leverage our diversity in biological samples. We are also working to incorporate a disparities component into our already strong research into obesity and cancer.

Though we have a lot work ahead of us, I'm really excited by all of the capacity and potential that is unique to both the talents within our institution and the diversity in our catchment area. We have already made great strides thanks to Massey's increased focus on cancer prevention and control and our amazing group of colleagues who have stepped up to the charge and vision of our leadership. Our work is already being noticed across the country—I have seen our presentation on minority accruals in clinical trials shared at national conferences. I want us to work on telling our unique story and achieving our potential to become leaders in cancer disparity research. In doing so, we will have a great impact on our patients, the university and our communities. I truly believe we have all the pieces to achieve Comprehensive designation, and I'm looking forward to working with all of you to realize this goal.

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