



## **Leaders' Update**

### **A message from Director Gordon Ginder**

Massey's NCI Site Visit for the renewal of our Cancer Center Support Grant (CCSG – the grant that distinguishes Massey as an NCI-designated cancer center) was held on September 29. The cancer center's associate directors, program leaders, clinical research leaders and shared resource directors joined me in presenting to a group of peer reviewers and NCI staff on Massey's accomplishments in the past five years since we were last reviewed and our plans for the next five years.

We will receive a final summary critique of our CCSG in December and a final decision regarding renewal in January. Based on the accomplishments and progress we were able to demonstrate in our 1500 page application and at the site visit, we are optimistic that our evaluation will be positive.

I am pleased to share that Massey had significant progress to report at the site visit. We increased our NCI-recognized, peer-reviewed cancer research funding by 19 percent in the last review period (2012-July 31, 2016) compared to the previous review period (2008-2011). We also doubled the number of member multi-PI, NCI-recognized, peer-reviewed grants from 2012 to 2016, more than half of which are multi-institutional and nearly half are transdisciplinary.

Additionally, we had more than 1,700 peer-reviewed scientific publications in 2011-2015, of which 46 percent were collaborative, representing intra-programmatic, inter-programmatic or multi-institutional collaborations. We also saw a 55 percent increase in high-impact (>8 impact factor) scientific publications in 2012-2015 over 2008-2011.

Likewise, we increased the translation of our new scientific findings into clinical trials, tripling the number of our translational investigator-initiated trials based on Massey science since our last review in 2011.

Furthermore, we continued to grow our membership. Since 2011, we recruited 36 faculty to VCU and Massey who were crucial to achieving the goals of our Vision 2016 Strategic Plan, and we also recruited new research members from within VCU schools and departments. Joining us were both senior and junior investigators with diverse research interests and scientific backgrounds spanning multiple departments and schools at VCU and comprising various Massey membership levels and programs.

Our involvement of trainees in Massey cancer research has been strong, with 230 predoctoral and 244 postdoctoral trainees part of Massey members' programmatic research since 2011, as

well as 67 fellows trained in Hematology, Oncology and Palliative Care, Surgical Oncology, Radiation Oncology and Pediatric Oncology since 2011. We have received more than a dozen T32, R25 and F30 training grants; provided training specifically for underrepresented minorities through the T34 Minority Access to Research Careers and R25 post-baccalaureate research training for underrepresented minorities; and collaborated with the VCU CTSA Translational Endeavor Core for faculty development with formal training in biostatistics, research design and regulatory processes.

We also presented on the impact of our research on our catchment area. As Massey is part of the VCU Health “Safety-Net”, 74 percent of our patients are from vulnerable populations, of which 75 percent are minorities, chiefly African American. As such, a major focus for Massey has been on increased clinical, prevention and control research, and public education dissemination in vulnerable and minority populations. To that end, Massey has received a \$4.4 million MU-NCORP award from NCI to foster minority access to clinical trials; \$2.1 million/year in current peer-reviewed funding to support disparities research; \$4.7 million in funding from the Virginia Tobacco Commission to support community health education in rural communities; and the National Outreach Network Community Health Educator supplement from NCI to expand community health outreach.

In addition, we presented the working draft of a 5-year strategic plan that will guide the cancer center through 2021. The cancer center’s leadership team is working to finalize the Vision 2021 strategic plan. Prioritization of the steps for implementation will be discussed at a senior leadership retreat in early 2017. You will hear more about the plan in your research program meetings once the plan is finalized.

A major priority established in the strategic plan is the development of cross-cutting scientific themes to promote transdisciplinary collaborations and translation. The scientific themes identified are: Obesity, Metabolism, Inflammation and Cancer; Immuno-Oncology; and Precision Oncology. Another major cross-cutting focus will be in disparities and minority health research. Also, a significant priority will be to expand Massey’s disease-specific focus groups in breast cancer, hematologic malignancy, GI cancer, neuro-oncology and respiratory (lung and head and neck) cancer to bring together basic, clinical and population scientists, and to develop a new focus group in prostate cancer to better address a major cancer problem in our catchment area. An additional important goal is to enhance the impact of education, training and mentoring on Massey science.

To support our Vision 2021 strategic plan, we have added two new leadership positions – associate director for education and training and associate director for disparities research – and appointed outstanding inaugural holders of these positions.

Massey researcher Devanand Sarkar, M.B.B.S., Ph.D., associate professor from the Department of Human and Molecular Genetics and Institute of Molecular Medicine, has been appointed the associate director for education and training. In this role, he will oversee and coordinate the center’s professional education and training activities. He will also chair the new Cancer Education Steering Committee, which is aimed at increasing funding from training grants and developing internal funding mechanisms to build training programs. Dr. Sarkar has been at Massey since 2009 and currently holds the Harrison Foundation Distinguished Professorship in

Cancer Research. He studies the molecular mechanism of carcinogenesis, primarily in hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), and is working to develop novel, targeted anti-cancer therapies.

We were fortunate to recruit as the associate director for disparities research Vanessa Sheppard, Ph.D., who joined VCU in September as the chair of the Department of Health Behavior and Policy. At Massey she will also serve as co-leader of the Cancer Prevention and Control program. In her role as AD for disparities research, she will lead the cancer center's efforts to advance high-priority disparities and minority health research across our research programs and themes. She will develop and facilitate a disparities work group and collaborate with other cancer center leaders to foster transdisciplinary science focused on the biological, clinical and social determinants of disparities. Dr. Sheppard came to us from Georgetown University, where she was a tenured associate professor in the Department of Oncology and assistant director of health disparities research at the Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center. She has been recognized by the National Institutes of Health as a Disparities Scholar, and her research and teaching are focused on reducing inequities in cancer outcomes.

Thank you all for your important contributions to Massey's accomplishments. Your great efforts helped us to have what we feel is our strongest CCSG application and site visit to date. I look forward to updating you in early 2017 about our final NCI award letter and to working with you over the next five years to accomplish the goals set forth in our Vision 2021 plan.

Regards,

Gordon D. Ginder, M.D.  
Director