BRIDGING THE HEALTH-CARE DIVIDE IN THE BRONX

Bad behaviors cause bad diseases. Overeating, smoking and alcohol abuse are among the prime causes of illness and death nationwide. Einstein researchers have responded. They are taking simple, safe and relatively inexpensive interventions to the streets of the Bronx to improve the health of its medically underserved population.

Half of all illnesses and deaths in the United States could be prevented, according to a recent Institute of Medicine (IOM) study. By stopping smoking, curbing alcohol consumption, improving their diets, lowering their stress levels and otherwise changing their behavior, many people could avoid lung cancer, heart disease and other major killers.

The field of behavioral and social science aims to motivate people to lead healthier lives. Its practitioners seek strategies to help them stop smoking, get more exercise and make other lifestyle changes proven effective in preventing disease. But as the IOM study notes, less than 5 percent of the two trillion dollars spent yearly on health care in the United States goes to reducing behavioral and social risk factors.

The IOM authors would be heartened by visiting Einstein, where Bronx-based behavioral and social science research is thriving. A prime example is the new Marilyn and Stanley M. Katz Comprehensive Cancer Prevention and Control Program, the result of a $7 million gift from longtime Einstein Overseers and Benefactors Marilyn and Stanley M. Katz.

Einstein's community outreach is not limited to adults. Through the work of its nationally recognized Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center, Einstein also helps children with developmental disabilities.

The health-care gap between the real and the ideal is substantial in the Bronx. Einstein researchers are working hard to bridge it.

RESEARCH AT CERC: A NEW BEGINNING

Over the last half century, the Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center (CERC) has helped thousands of children who have serious developmental problems. But the need to provide clinical care had compromised CERC's ability to conduct research.

Now, for the first time, CERC will have a full-time research director: neuroscientist John J. Foxe, Ph.D.

Dr. Foxe was recruited from the City University of New York, where he currently directs the Ph.D. program in cognitive neuroscience and codirects its Children's Research Unit. Many of his projects—and about 25 members of his Children's Research Unit team—will accompany him to Einstein.

"CERC serves about 7,000 children yearly and is an incredible resource for recruiting patients for clinical research," says Dr. Foxe. He expressed gratitude to Einstein's National Women's Division, which recently completed a three-year, $3 million fundraising initiative to establish CERC's clinical research program.

Dr. Foxe is planning research partnerships with other Einstein scientists. For example, he'll be working with colleagues in genetics and psychiatry to search for gene mutations or other indicators—called biomarkers—that may identify children prone to schizophrenia.

"Schizophrenia is really a neurodevelopmental disease," says Dr. Foxe. "If we can identify patients in late childhood who are at risk for schizophrenia, we may be able to prevent it from developing."

Much of CERC's research will involve autism. This year, Dr. Foxe and his research partner, Sophie Molholm, Ph.D. (who'll join Einstein as associate professor of pediatrics and of neuroscience), were awarded $2.8 million by the National Institutes of Health to study why autistic people have trouble processing sounds and other sensory input.

CERC will also assist Michelle Dunn, Ph.D., associate clinical professor of neurology at Einstein and acting director of the Einstein/Montefiore Autism Evaluation and Treatment Center, at her intervention program for autistic children in Co-Op City schools.

"It's very important for us basic researchers to have a strong relationship with clinicians such as Dr. Dunn, who see children with autism every day and understand their problems," says Dr. Foxe.

Nancy Tarshis, left, director of speech and language services at the Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center, and Debbie Meringolo, associate director of the infant and toddler team, work with two young CERC patients. CERC and its positive impact on children in the Bronx were celebrated recently in a film produced by Einstein Overseers and longtime Benefactors Philip and Rita Rosen. To see their film online, visit www.einstein.yu.edu/cerc.

RALPH AND JUNE ADORNO

Ralph and June Adorno have made a gift of a fully paid $500,000 life insurance policy in support of the new Marilyn and Stanley M. Katz Comprehensive Cancer Prevention and Control Program at Einstein.

"We have long admired Marilyn and Stanley Katz's commitment to cancer research at Einstein," says June Adorno. "After meeting with Dr. I. David Goldman, director of the Albert Einstein Cancer Center, and some of the researchers—and seeing for ourselves the incredible work they're doing—we decided it was time to get more involved."

Supporting the program established by the Katzes was "a great opportunity to do something for the good of society that would help save lives," adds Ralph Adorno.

AUTISM SPEAKS

Autism Speaks has contributed $150,000 as part of a multiyear commitment to support a research study led by Thomas V. McDonald, M.D., professor in the departments of medicine and of molecular pharmacology, using the *Drosophila* (fruit fly) model to identify possible drug treatments for autism spectrum disorders.

SNUFFING OUT CANCER IN THE BRONX

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the United States and the Bronx. Bruce D. Rapkin, Ph.D., director of Einstein's new Marilyn and Stanley M. Katz Comprehensive Cancer Prevention and Control Program, wants to snuff out smoking all over the Bronx, but especially among those most endangered by the habit.

"About 18 percent of Bronx adults are smokers," says Dr. Rapkin. "All too often, those most resistant to quitting are people whose health is already precarious—particularly individuals with substance abuse or mental-health problems or who are HIV-positive. They haven't benefited from conventional antismoking campaigns, so we've created a Tobacco Prevention and Cessation Think Tank to understand the nature of their addiction."

Think-tank members come from half a dozen Einstein departments, including family and social medicine and psychiatry. They meet monthly to devise smoking-cessation programs geared toward recalcitrant smokers. They are also applying for grants to help them reach this population. "Our mission at Einstein extends from community prevention and early detection all the way to support for cancer patients, survivors and their families," Dr. Rapkin says of his ambitious agenda.

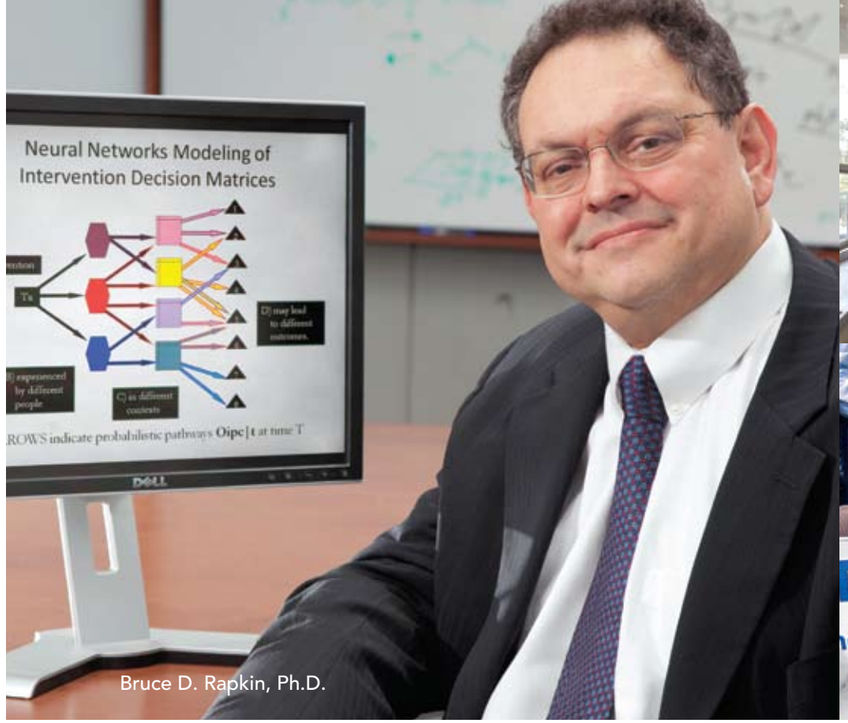
Dr. Rapkin was recruited to Einstein from Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, where he worked for 16 years—the last six as director of the Community Health and Health Disparities Laboratory.

Some of the innovative projects that Dr. Rapkin started at Memorial Sloan-Kettering have become part of his new Einstein program. Queens Library HealthLink is an especially notable success story.

"The philosophy behind Queens Library HealthLink is to let each community find its own best path to overcome health disparities," he says. Key to this project's achievements are its Cancer Action councils—groups of dedicated volunteers who meet monthly at 14 Queens libraries to discuss expanding access to cancer screening and treatment services in their communities.

In Flushing, a neighborhood with many immigrants who speak little or no English, the local Cancer Action Council drew up cancer-resource guides and other outreach materials in Spanish, Chinese and Korean.

"I speak five languages and joined this group because I want to use my language skills to help save lives," says volunteer Mabel Narbutt. She visits restaurants and beauty parlors in Flushing, talking to people in Mandarin and Taiwanese about the group's events and distributing its resource guides.



Bruce D. Rapkin, Ph.D.

"Most of these people don't have health insurance and appreciate learning things such as where they can get free mammograms," she adds.

The Cancer Action councils identify community needs and plan programs with help from Dr. Rapkin's team at Einstein. These programs, which also include smoking-cessation workshops and cancer support groups, have so far reached more than 4,000 Queens residents. And participating in this sort of grassroots effort also benefits Dr. Rapkin and his colleagues.

"There are lots of things we learn by working with partners in the community—even setting the research agenda together—that you don't get to learn in a carefully controlled lab or clinic setting," says Dr. Rapkin. "You get new insights into the barriers and motivations that affect people."

Plans call for establishing Cancer Action councils in the Bronx over the coming months, adapting the successful Queens program to the patient population of the local community.

In developing Bronx-based programs, the new Einstein cancer prevention team takes a special interest in the psychological toll that cancer takes. For that reason, Dr. Rapkin is working with Alyson Moadel, Ph.D., associate professor of medicine and of epidemiology & population health at Einstein, to create a new Psycho-Oncology Translational Research Clinic.

Dr. Moadel and her colleagues will develop and study psychological and behavioral interventions for cancer patients and their families—addressing, for example, sexual-health issues in couples after cancer surgery or helping head and neck cancer patients quit smoking.

> "There are lots of things we learn by working with partners in the community that you don't learn in a lab or clinic setting."

"We want to determine the kinds of programs that would be most useful and adapt them to people in the Bronx," says Dr. Rapkin. "I'm excited about this because there hasn't been enough research on psychological or behavioral care for cancer patients of color or who speak Spanish or have limited resources."

Dr. Rapkin and his team will continue forming new partnerships with community-based organizations and to seek their input as they roll out more programs. They are now talking with Bronx agencies serving low-income populations about creating a breast cancer screening program aimed at reaching women who are not getting mammograms on a regular basis.

"You need these community partnerships to reach the people who might otherwise fall through the cracks," says Dr. Rapkin.

Above, Chinazo Cunningham, M.D., M.S. (top) and Lynne M. Holden, M.D.; at right, Chinedu Nabuobi, a second-year Einstein medical student in the Mentoring in Medicine program meeting with students interested in health-care careers.

BOOSTING MINORITY STUDENTS INTO HEALTH-CARE CAREERS

Lynne M. Holden, M.D., is cofounder of Mentoring in Medicine (MIM), an Einstein/Montefiore partnership that introduces minority students to careers in health care. "We wanted to help kids who have a dream but don't have role models they can emulate," says Dr. Holden, associate professor of clinical emergency medicine at Einstein.

Since helping form MIM in 2006, Dr. Holden and her team have recruited 500 volunteer mentors—physicians, paramedics and others—who talk to students about the rewards of health-care careers and help them apply to schools that train health professionals.

Nearly 6,500 students have participated in MIM programs, including after-school clubs and an internship in which they volunteer in Montefiore's emergency department. Eighteen MIM participants are now studying to be physicians, physician assistants, nurses, pharmacists or public-health professionals.

In October, Dr. Holden was named a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leader for her work with MIM.

"The entire Einstein community is tremendously proud of Dr. Holden," says Edward R. Burns, M.D., Einstein's executive dean. "Her work with MIM is an innovative way to increase the diversity of the country's health-care workforce and, ultimately, reduce health disparities."

THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has committed $409,543 to support the research of Einstein scientists, including a multiyear grant of $299,999 for a study led by Alain Harris Litwin, M.D., M.S., M.P.H., associate professor of clinical medicine and of clinical psychiatry and behavioral sciences. The study involves treating people in methadone clinics who have hepatitis C.

NEW TREATMENT FOR HEROIN ADDICTS

In 2002, an alternative to methadone called buprenorphine received approval for treating opiate addiction. Chinazo Opia Cunningham, M.D., M.S., associate professor of medicine at Einstein, is now conducting an innovative program in the South Bronx that uses buprenorphine to help people stop using heroin. She was motivated by the tremendous growth in opiate abuse in the area, the limited options for drug treatment and the benefits that buprenorphine provides.

Compared with methadone, buprenorphine has a better safety profile, as it is less likely to be misused or diverted and less likely to result in an overdose. As a result, the treatment is approved for use in primary-care settings, such as Dr. Cunningham's Bronx facility. And it is convenient as well: After a couple of initial office visits, patients return only every four to eight weeks to get their supply of buprenorphine tablets.

"This program has helped hundreds of drug users in the Bronx," says Dr. Cunningham. "Our patients are saying things like, 'You really saved my life' and 'I never thought I would be clean this long.'"

To expand buprenorphine's use within the Montefiore/Einstein system, Dr. Cunningham offers seminars to physicians and to residents who care for hospitalized patients. She wants them to refer patients to her program and receive the necessary training to prescribe buprenorphine themselves.

JUDY R. ROSENBERG'S LASTING LEGACY OF SUPPORT FOR DIABETES RESEARCH

Diabetes is another health problem that is especially prevalent in the Bronx. With the help of its donors, Einstein has launched programs to combat this worsening epidemic.

Judy R. Rosenberg was one of a pioneering group of women who, beginning in 1953, helped turn the dream of a medical school at Yeshiva University into reality. A passionate supporter of the College of Medicine until her death in 2008, Judy served on the Einstein Board of Overseers for 30 years and was a founder of Einstein's National Women's Division.

Judy and her husband, Alfred, were Benefactors of the College of Medicine, and they endowed the position of Faculty Scholar in Diabetes Research at Einstein. In 1996, following Alfred's death, Judy established the Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg Endowed Professorial Chair in Diabetes Research. The Rosenberg Chair is currently held by Jeffrey E. Pessin, Ph.D., director of Einstein's Diabetes Research Center.

Jeffrey E. Pessin, Ph.D., the Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg Endowed Professorial Chair in Diabetes Research, at work in his lab. Dr. Pessin is a professor in the departments of medicine and of molecular pharmacology at Einstein and directs its Diabetes Research Center.

THE JONAS EHRLICH CHARITABLE TRUST

The Jonas Ehrlich Charitable Trust has pledged $160,000 to support a collaborative research project to identify the underlying causes of autism and other developmental disorders. The study is being conducted by basic scientists at the Price Center/Block Research Pavilion together with clinical experts at Einstein's Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center.