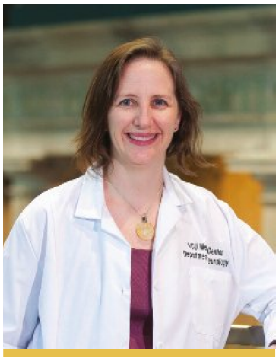
PARTNERS FOR DISCOVERY

Privately funded endowments support faculty, new discoveries

Professors who hold endowed chairs can build promising research programs knowing they have an ongoing, stable source of funding. Meet two newly recruited faculty members whose work is supported by privately funded endowments. Both were drawn to join the medical school because of its commitment to rapidly translating laboratory discoveries into treatments for patients.

by **Jen Uscher**

LAST FALL, a grassroots group of local Parkinson's disease patients known as the Movers and Shakers celebrated hitting the goal in a $5 million campaign. Matched dollar-for-dollar with funding from the medical school, that private philanthropy was essential for creating the VCU Parkinson's and Movement Disorders Center. Claudia M. Testa, M.D., Ph.D., points to the dedication of that volunteer group as one of the reasons she's now on the medical school's faculty.



Claudia M. Testa, M.D., Ph.D., holds the Joan Massey Chair in the VCU Parkinson's and Movement Disorders Center, where she is also associate director of clinical care and research.

- *Program Director, VCU Huntington's Disease Program*
- *Associate Professor in the Department of Neurology*

"Part of the appeal of joining VCU is that people in the local community had the enthusiasm and drive to build this great new center and made it happen," she said. The fundraising campaign also supports Testa's work in a concrete way: it produced the Joan Massey Endowed Chair that Testa now holds.

An expert in movement disorders, Testa is setting up a clinic that offers comprehensive care integrated with clinical research. This includes a multidisciplinary Huntington's disease program. The clinic will soon become an enrollment site for national studies such as PREDICT-HD, which looks at the earliest changes in thinking skills, emotions and brain structure that occur in people who are at risk for Huntington's disease but are undiagnosed.

She is also collaborating on studies of essential tremor with 14 other institutions as part of a North America consortium she founded. One of these studies aims to uncover the genetic variations that are associated with the onset of this common disorder. "We know that essential tremor tends to run in families but we don't know much yet about its genetic basis," Testa said.

Prior to joining the medical school last September, Testa was an assistant professor in the Department of Neurology and co-director of the Huntington's Disease Center of Excellence at Emory University.

Testa says that receiving the Joan Massey Chair means she can devote the time she needs to start up the new programs. "It covers part of my salary and shows VCU is committed to seeing these programs grow and succeed."

A RENOWNED PHYSICIAN-SCIENTIST, Steven R. Grossman, M.D., Ph.D., specializes in the treatment of gastrointestinal cancers and studies the role of tumor suppressor proteins in cancer. One of his research projects focuses on a protein called p53 that normally prevents cells from becoming cancerous. But when p53 is inactivated by, for example, a gene mutation, tumors are freed to grow. "We are investigating how p53 works normally so we can find ways of restoring its function in cancer cells," Grossman said, adding that his goal is to eventually design cancer therapies and prevention strategies based on this research.

Another of Grossman's objectives is to develop a drug that can inactivate a cancer-promoting protein known as CtBP. Grossman and his team may have found an answer in a compound called MTOB that can potentially be used to treat colon and pancreatic cancers. Currently they are testing the compound in combination with standard chemotherapy in a mouse model of human colon cancer. "We're hopeful that we can move this drug or a similar one into human trials at the Massey Cancer Center within the next two years," Grossman says.

Grossman joined the medical school last July from the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, Mass. He holds a grant from the National Institutes of Health and a prestigious Research Scholar Award from the American Cancer Society.

Grossman says that being offered the Dianne Nunnally Hoppes Endowed Chair in Cancer Research was a key factor in his decision to make the move. "Since it pays for a significant portion of my salary, that means that more of the money we receive from granting agencies can go towards our laboratory research – for instance, for hiring postdoctoral fellows and buying supplies," he explained. "Knowing that there is long-term, solid support for my research here was hugely important to me."

Steven R. Grossman, M.D., Ph.D., holds the Dianne Nunnally Hoppes Endowed Chair in Cancer Research made possible by members of the Moses D. Nunnally, Jr. family.

- *Chair of the Division of Hematology, Oncology and Palliative Care*
- *Professor in the Department of Internal Medicine with an affiliate appointment in the Department of Human and Molecular Genetics*