

# **AFAR Medical Student Summer Research Training in Aging Program**

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**Welcome to the NIA/AFAR/Hartford Medical Student Summer Research Training in Aging Program newsletter, which provides current and former program scholars, program directors, mentors, medical school faculty and staff, and others with news, updates, and special features about the program**

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## **2006 Program Update**

The NIA/AFAR/Hartford Medical Student Summer Research Training in Aging Program continues to draw a large number of outstanding applicants. This year, 139 qualified students from 49 medical schools applied.

On March 24, the program selection committee met to select the 2006 scholars who will remain at their own schools and will be funded through private funding sources. Several National Training Centers also relied on the review by the selection committee for the selection of their scholars. The scholarship winners will be announced on AFAR's Web site, [www.afar.org](http://www.afar.org), by early May, when all of the recipients have officially accepted their awards.

**Patricia Barry, MD, MPH**, Executive Director emeritus of the Merck Institute of Aging and Health, has served on the committee since 1997 and served as chair since 2002. "We have a wonderful, enthusiastic committee," says Dr. Barry. "We enjoy reviewing the applications and seeing the wide range of outstanding students who apply. It bodes well for the field." Current committee members, Drs. James Rudolph at Harvard and Crystal Simpson at Johns Hopkins, are both former student scholars. This is a testament to the program's success in channeling student scholars into careers in academic geriatrics (see [www.afar.org/committee.html#5](http://www.afar.org/committee.html#5) for a list of all committee members).

What does the selection committee look for in an application? "The personal statement is key and needs to be given serious time and consideration by the applicant," says Dr. Barry. "The statement is each student's opportunity to highlight her or his unique experiences and background, as well as to describe what they hope to get out of the program. The committee gives a lot of weight to what the students have to say about themselves and their goals."

Dr. Barry is pleased to be involved in a program that gives students an early exposure to geriatrics that they might not have otherwise. "In many schools, geriatrics is offered so late in the students' training that they have already become interested in another discipline."

Dr. Barry highlights the mentored research opportunities as a top feature of the program. "I am confident that every participating scholar will gain a better understanding of aging-related medical research. It is gratifying to know that working with dedicated research mentors and interacting with older patients has inspired former scholars to pursue careers in geriatrics, a field which has been incredibly stimulating and rewarding for me." The NIA and AFAR wish to thank Dr. Barry and the entire selection committee for committing their time and expertise to the application review and selection process.

#### **Student Scholars Poster Session - May 2006**

The poster session for 2005 program participants will take place on Saturday, May 6, 2006, in Chicago, IL, during the American Geriatrics Society (AGS) Annual Meeting. The session will be held from 10 am to 2 pm at the Swissôtel Chicago. It will give program scholars an opportunity to share their research findings with fellow medical students, program directors, mentors, and other senior scientists. The special session will also include a luncheon at which students can network with other students, their mentors, Directors of Centers of Excellence, and Hartford Foundation, AFAR, and AGS staff. Students who have questions about the poster session logistics should contact: Marianna Racz at [mracz@americangeriatrics.org](mailto:mracz@americangeriatrics.org). We look forward to seeing everyone there!

#### **A 2005 Scholar Prepares to Share Her Research Findings**

When 2005 Scholar Elizabeth Harlow told her mother she was creating a poster for the AGS Student Poster Session in Chicago, her mom asked her a question she wasn't expecting: "Do you have to buy construction paper?" Harlow assured her mom that no first-grade school supplies would be necessary. "I think she was worried about my lack of artistic ability," Harlow jokes.

Harlow completed her summer research project at her own medical school, Emory University, where she is in her second year. She studied health literacy in association with the observed tasks of daily living (OTDL). OTDL is a performance-based measure of everyday problem solving activities, specifically in older adults. "We were trying to see if there was a relationship between health literacy and functional independence," Harlow says. "Both are correlated with poor health outcomes, but they hadn't been studied in conjunction with each other prior to the study we did this summer."

Harlow looked at the three subsets of OTDL: phone usage, medication management, and financial management. She found that all three of those subsets, as well as the total OTDL score, were significantly lower in low health literate participants than in high health literate participants. "It would be beneficial in the long term if we take this research a bit further and begin to look at different ways for physicians to intervene, to help people with low health literacy better understand how to manage their medications and other health issues," she says.

Harlow says she thoroughly enjoyed working with her research mentor, Dr. Katharina Echt. Dr. Echt shares those sentiments. "Ms. Harlow is very dedicated, self-directed, and highly motivated," she says. "She was a pleasure to work with, and I have been honored to mentor such an outstanding individual."

After submitting an abstract, Harlow was invited to present her findings during an AGS Annual Meeting Poster Session on Thursday, May 4. She will present her poster again at the Student Poster Session on Saturday, May 6. She says she is nervous about presenting her research, but also excited, and is especially looking forward to sharing her findings with her fellow students. "Health literacy is truly an important issue, and it's not something I understood much about before doing this project," she says. "This is a good opportunity to get that information out there, so that as future physicians we will understand how significant health literacy can be for health outcomes and maintaining function and independence."

Overall, Harlow says that taking part in the medical student program was a wonderful experience. In addition to her research, she shadowed physicians and spent time in a nursing home. "I don't think I would have had much exposure to geriatrics if it wasn't for this program," she says. "It was a great opportunity to do some research and to get hands-on experience with older adults." Harlow now hopes to tailor a medical school elective to broaden that experience. Dr. Echt, for one, feels Harlow has the potential for a "very bright future" in geriatrics.

### **New Program Sponsor**

AFAR is pleased to acknowledge the newest scholarship program sponsor, the Community Health Foundation of Central and Western New York. Students from The University of Buffalo and SUNY Upstate Medical University were invited to apply for scholarships supported by the foundation. Rajitha Devadoss of SUNY Upstate was awarded a scholarship, and will be training at either Johns Hopkins University or UCSF Medical Center.

"Upstate New York outpaces many other parts of the country in the growth of our frail older adult population," says Ann Monroe, President of the Community Health Foundation. "Training physicians in aging-related research and the unique aspects of geriatrics is essential to our ability to provide quality health care in our region. Giving students from our local medical schools the opportunity to participate in a highly-regarded national program enables us to go beyond what we can do locally to enhance

medical student education in geriatrics. We are pleased to join the ranks of community foundations that support these program scholarships in their geographic areas."

"As a first year medical student, my head is often found in a book or classroom, and I am excited to be in a clinical and research setting to expand upon my medical education foundation," Devadoss says. "Many of us are not sure of what specialty to pursue or have the time to participate in research. This summer is a great opportunity to learn more about both in addition to living in a brand new place and meeting fantastic people!"

Please join us in congratulating Ms. Devadoss and in expressing appreciation to the Community Health Foundation of Central and Western New York for their support of medical student scholars in geriatrics.

### **Vital Visionaries**

Many medical students choose not to go into geriatrics because of various stereotypes about aging. The Vital Visionaries project, an arts-based program launched in March 2004 by the National Institute on Aging (NIA), aims to debunk those negative attitudes while making older people aware of their creative possibilities. "Too often medical students only interact with ill and frail older people, so they may develop a skewed perspective," says NIA Deputy Director Judith A. Salerno, M.D., M.S. "A first step towards improving care for older people is to improve how medical students see them."

The Vital Visionaries program is based on research suggesting that medical students who interact with older people early in their training develop better attitudes towards aging. The program pairs healthy older adults with first-year medical students for four art courses at museums. Before and after each course, the participants are asked about their attitudes towards aging. In the 2004 pilot program, 15 students from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine had significantly improved attitudes towards aging and older people. This spring and summer, the program will expand to include participants from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Washington University Medical School, the University of South Florida, Florida Center for Creative Aging, and the University of Florida.

### **Useful Links**

American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) - [www.aafp.org/x16563.xml](http://www.aafp.org/x16563.xml)  
Recommended curriculum guidelines in the Care of Older Adults

American College of Physicians (ACP) -  
[www.acponline.org/srf/subspecialty\\_brochure.htm](http://www.acponline.org/srf/subspecialty_brochure.htm)

Description of Internal Medicine geriatrics training and certification  
American Federation for Aging Research (AFAR) - [www.afar.org](http://www.afar.org)

American Geriatrics Society (AGS) - [www.americangeriatrics.org](http://www.americangeriatrics.org)

AGS Student Chapters -

[www.americangeriatrics.org/education/geristudents/EstablishAGSchapter/chapters\\_list.shtml](http://www.americangeriatrics.org/education/geristudents/EstablishAGSchapter/chapters_list.shtml)

American Medical Student Association (AMSA) Geriatrics Interest Group -

[www.amsa.org/ger/](http://www.amsa.org/ger/)

Society for General Internal Medicine Special Interest Group in Geriatrics -

[www.sгим.org/geriatrics.cfm](http://www.sгим.org/geriatrics.cfm)