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On the Job-Chuck Rowland, MSN, CRNP

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Jefferson and Lankenau Institute of Medical Research Collaborate on Cancer Research

Located along Philadelphia’s Main Line in Wynnewood, Pa., the Lankenau Institute for Medical Research (LIMR) aims to advance health and well-being through research to improve the detection and treatment of disease; the rapid transfer of new technology to the clinic; and the training of the next generation of scientists and physicians.

Founded in 1927, LIMR now has a team of 120 – including 20 resident faculty members – working to advance its mission. Those investigators include LIMR President and CEO George C. Prendergast, PhD, who also serves as editor in chief of Cancer Research, the most highly cited journal in the field, and Janet Sawicki, PhD, Professor, whose work focuses on cancer nanotherapy and related technologies.

In recent years, Drs. Prendergast and Sawicki have been collaborating successfully with the Jefferson Department of Surgery on research related to diagnosis and treatment of pancreatic and ovarian cancers. As Jonathan Brody, PhD, Director of the Division of Surgical Research recalls, the relationship took root in 2007, when Dr. Sawicki delivered a presentation on cancer nanotherapy at the monthly Surgical Research Seminar hosted by the Division.

Since then, Jefferson and LIMR have co-authored multiple publications and secured four nationally recognized grants (including from NIH and the American Cancer Society) worth roughly a million dollars.

The grants have funded research on predicting and optimizing the effect of gemcitabine therapy in ovarian and pancreatic cancers; using the HuR stress response gene to enhance Gemcitabine therapy; using HuR to combat chemotherapeutic resistance in ovarian cancer; and IDO2 targeting for pancreatic cancer treatment. Early work seeding the IDO2 collaboration was published initially by the Jefferson-LIMR team in the Journal of the American College of Surgery in 2009.

“Both these collaborations are unique and allow us to attack these tumors with different strategies,” Dr. Brody says. “Drs. Prendergast and Sawicki are the only people in the world I could do this particular work with, and luckily, they are in our backyard.”

The collaboration has been beneficial to the researchers at LIMR, as well: “I met Dr. Brody not long after he moved to Jefferson from Johns Hopkins with Dr. Charlie Yeo’s team, when we were each just beginning to become interested in how IDO2 may affect cancer,” recalls Dr. Prendergast. “We had discovered this gene as a result of our work in cancer immunotherapy, but its connections to pancreatic cancer would not have been made so soon without Dr. Brody’s initial observation that brought us together.”

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Dr. Sawicki feels similarly about the interactions that started with the seminar at Jefferson: “Jonathan and I quickly identified a few high-impact questions of common interest where our research programs could readily benefit from collaborative work,” she said. “We were fortunate that the multidisciplinary synergies in the work we started were welcomed so readily by the grant review committees who have made its development possible.

“For me, the ability to benefit from access to clinical specimens and linked databases was critical, given that few groups have assembled such a valuable foundation to enable research into the questions I wished to pursue.”

Jefferson and LIMR are currently preparing two grants for roughly $1.25 million each from the NIH Research Project Grant Program (R01). If awarded, these grants will fund research targeting HuR and IDO molecules for the treatment of pancreatic cancer and ovarian cancers – which all three investigators hope will be translated to the clinic within the next few years.

For more information about the Division of Surgical Research visit: www.jefferson.edu/surgery