

UCSD Psychiatrist David Braff Receives Distinguished Investigator Award

The Mental Health Research Association awards \$100,000 grant to advance understanding of schizophrenia

June 26, 2007

Debra Kain

David Braff, M.D, professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine received the prestigious Distinguished Investigator Award in recognition of his work linking genetics to schizophrenia from NARSAD: The Mental Health Research Association - the world's leading charity dedicated to funding research on psychiatric disorders. In addition, NARSAD (formerly known as the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression) selected five young scientists from UCSD to receive "2007 Young Investigator" Awards - two-year, \$60,000 grants for research on psychiatric disorders.

Braff will receive a one-year grant of \$100,000 to advance a project to understand the complex genetic makeup of different measurable characteristics of schizophrenia, as well as explore the genetic basis of functional impairments associated with the illness. Braff, director of the Schizophrenia Program at UCSD School of Medicine, is one of 23 outstanding scientists who are receiving the Distinguished Investigator award in a highly competitive grant program for investigators who have established themselves as leaders in their fields.

"This NARSAD-funded project will enable us to learn more about how various candidate genes for schizophrenia interact to produce neurophysiologic, neurocognitive, and day-to-day functional impairments," said Braff. This would establish a "real-world" link between genetics and the symptoms of schizophrenia, which in turn could lead to improved treatments, according to Braff, who was also recently elected President of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology.

"Dr. Braff is an outstanding scientist, representing the very best in the field and pursuing innovative and promising research," said Constance E. Lieber, president of NARSAD. NARSAD's Scientific Council, comprised of 94 prominent neuroscientists, reviews the research proposals NARSAD receives and recommends grants. NARSAD created the Distinguished Investigator Award to support highly significant research by established scientists-full professors or their equivalent-who are on the cusp of a breakthrough.

The Young Investigator Award is designed to help promising scientists entering research - such as post-doctoral fellows, advanced standing medical residents and assistant professors - to generate pilot data necessary for larger grants. The following five UCSD scientists are among 222 early-career scientists in the United States and 10 other countries who will receive funds from NARSAD to advance their research on mental illnesses:

Estibaliz Arce, Ph.D., postdoctoral researcher in the UCSD Department of Psychiatry, plans to examine psychological and brain processes involved in resilience, or the capacity to cope with stressful or negative events. She hopes to contribute to the search for biomarkers for future therapeutic targets of medication interventions, and test cognitive-behavioral interventions to promote resilience.

Joon Kim, Ph.D., postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Neurosciences, is exploring a link between the developmental brain disorder Joubert syndrome and schizophrenia. Kim and his colleagues recently discovered a mutated gene identified as a cause of Joubert disease, and hope their findings may also be relevant to schizophrenia.

Thomas W. Meeks, M.D., postdoctoral researcher in the UCSD Department of Psychiatry, will investigate the relationship between major depression and chronic musculoskeletal pain, such as the pain of osteoarthritis, among older adults. His results should help determine the potential for treatments targeting neuroimmunological pathways.

David Sitzer, Ph.D., wants to test a novel form of cognitive rehabilitation for adults with schizophrenia. He has developed a comprehensive strategy combining elements of Cognitive Adaptation Training (CAT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) which he calls Cognitive Behavioral and Environmental Skills Training, or CBEST.

Elizabeth Twamley, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychiatry, will explore some biological underpinnings of cognition difficulties and treatment response in schizophrenia. Specifically, she will pursue leads from new data about the COMT gene, which acts to adjust levels of dopamine in the brain and is relevant to the cognitive deficits of schizophrenia. She hopes to discover genetic predictors of treatment response and behavioral markers of risk for schizophrenia, which could aid in early detection and treatment.

Media Contact: Debra Kain, 619-543-6163

