

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
RESEARCH ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON GULF WAR VETERANS' ILLNESSES (RACGWVI)

BIOGRAPHIES OF INVITED SPEAKERS

INVITED SPEAKERS

Karen Block, Ph.D.

VA Office of Research & Development (ORD) Gulf War Senior Research Program Manager. Dr. Block is a nationally and internationally recognized expert in the field of molecular mechanisms driving human disease with focus on the role of oxidative stress in carcinogenesis, cancer-drug resistance, and diabetes-induced organ damage. Academically, Dr. Block was an Associate Professor of Medicine who served as an Executive member of the Cancer Therapy and Research Center and Associate Director of Shared Resources at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and was a health research scientist with the VA since 2005. Her career is balanced with solid independent National Institutes of Health and VA funding achievements, publication of scientific manuscripts in high impact factor journals, authorship of expert review articles and book chapters, participation in and chairing of grant reviews and University programs as well as steering committees, and performance of site visits in addition to training clinician- and non-clinician-scientists. She joined ORD in Washington DC in 2016. She is also the RACGWVI Designated Federal Officer.

Robert A. Bonomo, MD, FIDSA, AAP, AAM, FESCMID

Dr. Robert A. Bonomo is Distinguished University Professor of Medicine, Pharmacology, Molecular Biology and Microbiology, Biochemistry, and Proteomics and Bioinformatics at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. He also serves as Associate Chief of Staff for Academic Affairs at the Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center. Formerly, he was Chief of the Medical Service at the Cleveland VA and Vice Chair for Veterans Affairs in the Department of Medicine at University Hospitals of Cleveland for nine years. Dr. Bonomo also serves as the Director of the Cleveland Geriatric Research and Education Clinical Care Center (GRECC), Director of the Coordinating Center, VA Science and Health Initiative to Combat Infectious and Life-Threatening Diseases (VA SHIELD), and Director of the CWRU-Cleveland VAMC Center for Antimicrobial Resistance and Epidemiology (Case VA CARES). Recently, he was designated Senior Clinician Scientist Investigator of the Veterans Health Administration. His research interests include the mechanistic basis of resistance to β -lactam antibiotics and β -lactamase inhibitors in Gram-negative and Mycobacteria, discovery of novel therapeutic agents effective against multidrug-resistant (MDR) pathogens, the molecular epidemiology of MDR Gram-negative bacteria in long term care facilities and in immunocompromised patients, infections in the elderly, and the implementation of molecular diagnostics in clinical care of elderly patients with infectious disease. He is an elected fellow of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, American Academy of Microbiology, the Association of American Physicians, the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID) and has been appointed to PCORI as a representative of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. He was Co-Director of the Laboratory Center of the NIH Sponsored Antibacterial Resistance Leadership Group (ARLG). In 2016 Dr. Bonomo was presented with the Excellence in Clinical Microbiology Award from ESCMID. The William S. Middleton Award by the Biomedical Laboratory Research and Development Service (BLR&D) of the Veterans Health Administration was given in 2017. Dr. Bonomo received the lifetime achievement award from the VA Society of Practitioners of Infectious Diseases (VASPID) in 2018. In 2020, Dr. Bonomo received the Wolcott Award for Excellence in a leadership or management position

through exceptional support for direct patient care providers, including support of innovations enhancing the quality of direct patient care delivery.

Linda Chao, Ph.D.

Dr. Chao, a cognitive neuroscientist, is an Adjunct Professor in the Departments of Radiology and Biomedical Imaging and Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, as well as a Research Biologist at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center. She has studied Gulf War (GW) Veterans and Gulf War illness (GWI)-related issues for the past 15 years. Her GW research program at the San Francisco VA uses a three-pronged approach to understand and treat Gulf War Illness: (1) examining the effect of exposures to specific Gulf War-related neurotoxicants on brain structure and brain function (VA Merit Review Awards CX0007080 and CX000798), (2) examining the role of genetic differences in responses to Gulf War-related exposures (DOD/CDMRP W81XWH-16-1-0558), and (3) developing and evaluating interventions that may help alleviate the symptoms of GWI (VA Merit Review Award CX001428). She has published and, more importantly, replicated some of the first neuroimaging evidence of reduced brain and hippocampal volume and white matter abnormalities in GW Veterans with predicted exposure to the Khamisiyah plume. Sleep disturbance is a common complaint among GW Veterans suffering from GWI and, in 2016, Dr. Chao published the first study to document subjective sleep disturbances in GW Veterans. Dr. Chao's publication and research track record demonstrate that she has the necessary background and expertise to successfully carry out all aspects of proposed projects, together with the strong team of co-Investigators that she has assembled.

CDR Jean-Paul Chretien, M.D., Ph.D.

Program Manager, Biological Technologies Office, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). CDR Jean-Paul Chretien joined DARPA as a program manager in 2020. Chretien earned a Bachelor of Science degree in political science from the United States Naval Academy, Master of Health Science in biostatistics and Doctor of Philosophy in genetic epidemiology degrees from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and a Doctor of Medicine degree from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. He completed his residency in general preventive medicine at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and fellowship in health sciences informatics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. His interests include disease and injury prevention, operational medicine, and biothreat countermeasures. Prior to coming to DARPA, Chretien led the Pandemic Warning Team at the Defense Intelligence Agency's National Center for Medical Intelligence. A naval medical officer, his previous assignments include senior policy advisor for biodefense in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy; team lead for Innovation & Evaluation at the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Branch; and director of force health protection for U.S. and NATO forces in southwestern Afghanistan.

Beatrice Alexandra Golomb, MD, PhD

Is a Professor of Medicine at UC San Diego with over 15 years of experience treating veteran patients, including veterans with Gulf War Illness (GWI). Dr. Golomb was the sole scientist on a high-level Department of Defense (DoD) fact finding/fact disseminating mission to the Middle East related to GWI. She was the inaugural Scientific Director for the Congressionally directed Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses (RAC) and her research for RAND and the DoD have expanded knowledge of exposure relations, mechanisms, markers and treatment for GWI.

Drew Helmer, M.D., M.S.

Deputy Director, Center for Innovations in Quality, Effectiveness, and Safety (IQuEST), Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, Houston, TX. Dr. Helmer obtained his educational degrees at Columbia University. He is an expert in deployment-related health concerns and the impact of combat deployment on the health and well-being of military service members. Dr. Helmer serves as Deputy Director of IQuEST at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston, Texas. Previously, he was Director of the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) at the VA-New Jersey Health Care System and Associate Professor of Medicine at Rutgers University-New Jersey Medical School. In addition to caring for Veterans and educating providers about post-deployment health, Dr. Helmer studies health care utilization and outcomes important to deployed Veterans. He has published more than 80 peer-reviewed articles and a book for a lay audience on these topics. Dr. Helmer also serves on the RACGWVI Veteran Engagement Subcommittee and is presenting this report to the full committee.

Amy M. Kilbourne, Ph.D., MPH

Dr. Amy M. Kilbourne, PhD, MPH is Director of the VA Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) and Professor of Learning Health Sciences at the University of Michigan. With over 45 centers across the U.S., the mission of QUERI is to improve Veteran health by accelerating the translation of research findings into real-world practice through national implementation initiatives. Dr. Kilbourne is a national expert in implementation science, notably the development and testing of strategies that support healthcare providers in delivering effective innovations more rapidly to their patients. Dr. Kilbourne has led several national implementation initiatives across the U.S. to improve patient outcomes including quality, equity, cost, and experience, and developed national Learning Health System-focused research agendas in health disparities, chronic conditions, and translational science. Dr. Kilbourne is also supporting VA's fulfillment of the Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act, which requires government agencies to use evidence and evaluation to justify program budgets. She has served on several national committees including the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Technical Expert Panel on Learning Health Care System Core Competencies and the NIH National Mental Health Advisory Council. Dr. Kilbourne received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California at Berkeley (double major in molecular biology and rhetoric), and her master degree in epidemiology and PhD in health policy from the University of California Los Angeles.

Shauna Stahlman, Ph.D., MPH

Senior Epidemiologist, Armed Forces Health Surveillance Division (AFHSD). Dr. Stahlman is the senior epidemiologist of the Epidemiology & Analysis (E&A) branch at the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Division (AFHSD), where she serves as a data steward and functional user of the Defense Medical Surveillance System (DMSS) and the DoD Serum Repository. She is a contributing editor of the Medical Surveillance Monthly Report, the flagship publication of AFHSD, and an adjunct assistant professor in the Preventive Medicine and Biostatistics Department at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. Prior to coming to AFHSD, she completed a post-doctoral fellowship at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health and worked as an analyst at the Veterans Health Administration in Los Angeles.

Thomas Thomou, Ph.D.

Senior Scientist & Engineer, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). Dr. Thomou is an accomplished Senior Scientist with a passion for making new

discoveries in scientific research. With a Ph.D. in Pathology and Laboratory Medicine as well as an advanced degree in Molecular Biology & Biomedicine. Dr. Thomou did five years of invaluable, post-doctoral training at the nation's most notable medical institutions -- such as Harvard Medical School and Mayo Clinic -- built a strong foundation for all aspects of experimental planning and development, study execution, and data interpretation and analysis. The major focus of his research is to assess the contribution of adipose tissue derived exosomal miRNAs in the circulation. This has led to the identification, evaluation, and development of novel cellular models facilitating studies on their impact on systemic metabolism in health and disease. Specifically, Dr. Thomou created the methodology and hypothesis and established novel methodologies in order to study fat derived exosomal miRNAs and their effect in systemic metabolism. One of the greatest achievements of his career in academia was having the opportunity to co-author a first author publication in Nature with Professor C. Ronald Kahn (in press). In addition, as an inventor, he was fortunate again to partner with C. Ronald Kahn in the discovery of "Therapeutic Interventions in the Liver via Adipose Derived Engineered Exosomes in vivo" (patent pending).

William "Bill" A. Watts, 1990-91 Gulf War Veteran

Mr. Watts is a decorated Gulf War Combat Veteran who deployed with the 4th Battalion, 5th Air Defense Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division, during the 1990-1991 Gulf War and liberation of Kuwait. He holds many distinguished awards including the Florida Senate Veterans Champion Award and was honored by Congress with the Congressional Veterans Commendation Award. Mr. Watts continues to serve his Gulf War community locally and nationally through his leadership volunteer roles on the local Senate Veterans Committee; is a founding member of Vet Info, a non-profit group which provides information, advocacy, and education for Veterans of all eras and conflicts. Using his knowledge of fishing, Mr. Watts helps Veterans who are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other disabilities by using piscatorial (fishing) therapy, an evidence-based research trial to support Gulf War Veterans with illnesses, and Gulf War Veteran-subject matter expert reviewer for the DoD Gulf War illness research program (GWIRP). Mr. Watts was appointed by the Mayor and Council of Doral, FL, to serve on the Doral Military Advisory Committee and is recognized by Miami-Dade County and the City of Doral Florida, where he currently lives, for his work with Veterans. In honor of his continued dedication to supporting his fellow Veterans, the city commissioners of the City of Fort Lauderdale, FL proclaimed Saturday, June 11, 2022, as William "Bill" Watts Day.