

**U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
Office of Research and Development
Meeting of the National Research Advisory Council (NRAC)
May 4, 2022**

Minutes

Committee Members Present

Dr. Ronald Poropatich, Chairman
Dr. Sanjay Doddamani
Dr. Steven Dubinett
Matthew Kuntz, JD
Dr. Paula Schnurr
Dr. Melina Kibbe
Dr. Rajeev Ramchand
Dr. Dallas Hack
Dr. Cato Laurencin
Dr. Julie Tamaska
Thomas Zampieri, PA

Committee Members Excused

Dr. Sidney Hinds

Speakers

Dr. Rachel Ramoni
Dr. George Lathrop
Dr. Stuart Hoffman
Dr. Karen Block
Mr. Matthew Verna
Dr. Amy Kilbourne
Dr. Karen Sanders
Dr. Gerhard Schulteis

Attendees

Liza Catucci, DFO
Rashelle Robinson, Alternate DFO

The virtual meeting of the VA's National Research Advisory Council (NRAC) took place on May 4th, 2022. Dr. Ron Poropatich opened the meeting with announcements about the presentation materials and details on the public comment period. He then invited Liza Catucci, DFO, to make opening comments.

Dr. Poropatich called the meeting to order. He told everyone to continue to stay safe in the current environment and thanked them all for joining today's meeting. He opened the floor by asking committee members to briefly introduce themselves and to describe the line of work they do. He described the purpose of the NRAC (charter) and reviewed

key takeaways from the previous NRAC Meeting. He then invited Dr. Melina Kibbe, new committee member, to comment.

Dr. Kibbe would like to expand and leverage opportunities for the VA with academic partners (working together with VA and universities). She hopes that NRAC can help to optimize resources and provide data on the effectiveness of vaccines (for example). There is a strong need to focus on Long COVID studies and research, as it does not only affect veterans but American citizens in general. The research would greatly benefit helping to move the country forward as advancements in COVID research is developing within the Department of Veteran Affairs. Dr. Kibbe felt the VA is a tremendous asset to the country especially now as it plays a role in bringing other agencies together to collaborate on research and a response regarding COVID and Long COVID effects. Dr. Kibbe mentioned the VA's attempt to reach a gold standard in analysis and the desire to bring people together to work on similar studies and streamline their work. A few members also spoke about the process of sharing data outside the VA and the drawbacks and advantages of that.

Dr. Rachel Ramoni was introduced and provided an overview of her work in development of the **Research Enterprise** and ORD's reorganizational design plan. (See *PowerPoint distributed with agenda.*) Dr. Ramoni discussed how to actively recruit more people into VA research positions.

Dr. George Lathrop was introduced and provided a **Sensitive Species' Subcommittee Update**. The subcommittee was established in 2021 to monitor sensitive species being used in the VA such as dogs, cats, and primates. The NRAC is working with other agencies to determine alternatives to research with these species. Dr. Lathrop emphasized that the need to reduce use of sensitive species derives from public law that requires establishment of a five-year plan to greatly reduce or eliminate the number of sensitive species within the VA, thus the purpose of the committee. A report is provided at each meeting of the NRAC which provides updates on refinement, reduction, and elimination of sensitive species. The idea of recruiting a few contracting subject matter experts (SMEs) to start the five-year plan is under consideration. (See *PowerPoint distributed with the agenda.*)

Dr. Stuart Hoffman was introduced to present his work in **Brain Health and Post Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)**. He gave a brief overview of ORD TBI and VA investments in the research from the 2000s beginning with the Obama Administration. He reminded the committee that several TBI studies occurred before the NRAC came into existence. During the current funding period, the goals are to gather data, obtain neural fingerprints of the deployment trauma phenotype and suicide, conduct preliminary studies of automated voice analysis of TRACTS (The Translational Research Center for TBI And Stress Disorders) clinical interviews, and to develop predictor profiles for opioid use disorder and overdose by using machine learning. He also explained the percentage and the correlation of risk factors between TBI and sleep apnea, concluding that veterans with TBI are 41% more likely to develop and sleep

disorder. He then spoke about some of the accomplishments of the research programs by each year. (See *PowerPoint distributed with the agenda.*)

Brief Break

After a brief recess, Dr. Karen Block was invited to present her work in the Gulf War Illness Research Program and the Military Exposures Research Programs (MERP). She described her work with toxic exposures including burn pits and ORD's collaboration with Patient Care Services/Health Outcomes Military Exposures (HOME). (See *PowerPoint distributed with the agenda.*)

The next discussion was co-presented by Matthew Verna, ORD Director of Finance and Dr. Amy Kilbourne, Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) Director, who provided an overview of the **VA Research Budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 & Identification of Budget Priorities for FY2024 Request**. The overall goal was to discuss the budget and how the budget relates to VA and research priorities in both fiscal years. The agenda of the presentation was broken down into three key sections: Section 1 was to review of the President's budget request, Section 2 was to start discussing the ORD methodology for setting research priorities outlined in previous budget submissions to Congress, and Section 3 was to provide an overview of recent research priorities to detail research priorities of Hill interest and obtain feedback for research priorities to consider in FY24 budget request. The FY23 Request was released in March 2022 and represented an increase from the previous year of 4% or \$34 million dollars. The request was for \$916 million dollars. The increase was determined by several factors such as inflation and new or current research that needed new or additional funding. The strategic priorities included increase veterans' access to high quality clinical trials, put VA data to work for veterans, actively promote diversity, equity and inclusion within the sphere of influence and building community through VA research.

Dr. Kilbourne specifically discussed how ORD is planning to make research priorities come to fruition (ORD Methodology for setting research priorities outlined in previous budget submissions to Congress). Stakeholders' inputs are key in helping to put priorities front and center to support the request for additional funding and where it should be allocated for research, which is divided into four groups: Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI), outside stakeholders such as NRAC and veterans, ORD Services and Congress/The Administration. The purpose of QUERI is to provide a bridge between research programs and VA program offices that need the research information and data. The emphasis is on clinical trials and the research developed from it. For NRAC stakeholders, they could provide advice to the VA on which topics to include among the agency's research priorities. They could also gather input by meeting with veterans and others through engagement opportunities. Through ORD Services, the research services can set their own service-level research priorities which are based in part on the national priorities which are determined by a range of

internal and external factors. For Congressional and Administration stakeholders, the priorities are based on constituents, veterans and other stakeholders. For FY24, the work will start this year, with the commencement of it starting in April 2022 and the final submission to Congress occurring in 2023. They want to maintain the priorities for both the FY23 and FY24 and transform the VA into a national research enterprise. The research priorities were also listed, which included military environmental exposure, TBI, precision oncology/access to clinical trials, mental health, electronic health records modernization and COVID related research and impacts. ORD want to incorporate much of the national priorities to improve veteran care in the long run. (*See PowerPoint distributed with the agenda.*)

For the next and final presentation Dr. Karen Sanders and Dr. Gerhard Schulteis co-lead a discussion on **VA's Response to GAO: Recommendations to Enhance Research Relationships**. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) gave recommendations in a report to ORD: 1) provide VA medical centers with examples of successful practices for strengthening research relationships with academic affiliates and the information should reflect the lessons learned from VA medical centers that have successfully cultivated these relationships and 2) develop tools such as a decisions tree and successful practices to help local VA medical center officials to decide which entity – NPCs or Academic affiliates – should administer extramural funding based on providing optimal support for research. Three critical needs were identified as the following: personnel development, NPC Development as a critical partner, and VHA/ORD Action Items. A timeline of action items was presented starting off with developing a white paper summarizing background process, identified successful practices and critical needs and ending with presenting final products to GAO by September 2022. (*See PowerPoint distributed with the agenda.*)

Following conclusion of all formal presentations, Dr. Poropatich opened the meeting up for public comments to the NRAC. Matt Kuntz asked if it was possible for all the NRAC members (those transitioning from different terms of the NRAC and new members) to receive a checklist of items being worked on and open tasks in advance of the next meeting. Dr. Poropatich thought that would be useful and asked Liza Catucci to generate a list. Dr. Laurencin commented on DEI and asked how it would be integrated across certain programs, especially with racial justice and veteran homelessness. Dr. Poropatich did not have answers, but recommended he contact Liza Catucci or Dr. Ramoni for information. Dr. Tenhula offered to discuss this topic offline and stated the research workforce in ORD has been making strides in this area, for example, by establishing a data subcommittee to specialize in the topic. Dr. Laurencin stated that he felt very close to the issue as a scientist of color and wanted to offer his support for their work.

Dr. Poropatich finished up the overall meeting by promising to send participants the slides from the May 4th NRAC meeting to look back on in case there was information missed. He opened the floor for public comments again, but none were provided. He then quickly ran through the action items that arose during the meeting and subsequently ended the meeting.

Action items:

- Liza Catucci to provide a checklist of items being worked on by the NRAC and open tasks in advance of the next meeting
- Request a DEI status report for the next meeting.
- Discuss ORD's role in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and how to leverage AI for research at the next meeting.
- Discuss the topic of veteran homelessness and research at the next meeting.
- Meet to discuss forming two additional subcommittees as below.
 - The VA National Research Action Plan: Dallas Hack, Chair. Volunteers included Stuart Hoffman, Matthew Kuntz, Rajeev Ramchand and Paula Schnurr.
 - Expanding VA Research Reach: Melina Kibbe, Chair. Volunteers included Paula Schnurr, Matthew Kuntz, Cato Laurencin, Steven Dubinett, and Rajeev Ramchand.
- Invite the NAAC to speak with NRAC Members on how we can partner to address some of the points raised by Dr. Kibbe.
- Review existing subcommittees at the next meeting to assess progress in the type of work they are doing.
- The next official meeting of the NRAC will occur on September 7, 2002. If ORD is able schedule an in-person meeting it may be held as a hybrid. Otherwise, the meeting will be entirely virtual.

The meeting adjourned at 2:10 p.m.

Submitted,

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Ronald Poropatich
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Dr. Ronald Poropatich
Chair, National Research Advisory Council