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MGH research award helps women establish scientific careers

Grant funding designed to assist those balancing family responsibilities with research demands

BOSTON – A program that provides modest research funding to women initiating careers in medical research has produced significant results in helping recipients both stay in academic research and establish groundwork for securing future research funding. In the Feb. 27 *Archives of Internal Medicine*, a team from the Office of Women’s Careers at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) reports on the first nine years of the program, which provides competitive, two-year grants to women junior researchers who also have responsibility for the care of young children.

Among the report’s findings are that 90 percent of the recipients have remained at the MGH, and more than half have received academic promotions at Harvard Medical School (HMS), an accomplishment that relies heavily on research productivity. A survey of recipients from the first seven years revealed that subsequent funding from sources such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) exceeded the cost of the award program more than twentyfold.

“These findings suggest that even limited bridge funding during particularly vulnerable years of women’s careers can help them stay in academic medicine and enjoy future research success,” says Nancy Tarbell, MD, director of the Center for Faculty Development and the Office of Women’s Careers at MGH, the paper’s senior author. “This program was a bold initiative to support women faculty, and its success speaks volumes about the MGH’s leadership in this critical issue”

The program is named the Claflin Distinguished Scholar Awards in recognition of Jane Claflin, a longtime supporter of the MGH who has served as a volunteer, trustee, and fundraiser. She led the hospital’s Women in Academic Medicine Committee from 1993 to 1997 and continues as the group’s co-chair. Established in 1997, the Claflin Awards provide funding to women physicians and scientists at the MGH who are within seven years of their first faculty appointment and responsible for the care of young children. The grant was originally \$30,000 per year for two years and was increased to \$50,000 per year in 2006. Two awards were made during each of the first four years; the number of awards increased to four in 2001 and six in 2002.

Of the award's 40 recipients, 36 are still at MGH, and 22 have received HMS promotions. The grants made from 1997 to 2004 cost the MGH \$2.1 million, but recipients from those years still at MGH – 32 of an original 35 – subsequently procured more than \$51 million in outside research funding. In response to a survey, awardees from those early years reported numerous research publications, presentations and related honors during the following years and also described the award's direct positive impact on their career development – including improving their impression of the hospital's commitment to their careers and their own outlook on their professional prospects.

One of the 1999 recipients was Karen K. Miller, MD, of the MGH Neuroendocrine Unit. At the time of her award, Miller had a 2-year-old and was expecting another child. She also had recently received an NIH grant to study the effects of testosterone on bone density and body composition in women with anorexia nervosa, a grant which did not cover the full costs of the investigation. Funds provided by the Claflin award allowed Miller to hire a research assistant, whose presence became even more critical when complications around Miller's second delivery kept her away from work much longer than anticipated.

“The Claflin award came at a time in my career when it was really critical to continue getting my work done – something that probably would not have been possible without that support – and to produce papers that would be published in high-quality journals,” Miller says. “At a time when demands on me personally were particularly high, the award enabled me to get through with my academic career potential intact.” In the years since, Miller has been promoted from instructor to assistant professor and recently received her first major NIH grant as an independent investigator.

While the research team acknowledges that the qualities that led Claflin recipients to be chosen for the award could have predicted their success as investigators, they also note that several studies have shown that women researchers have historically lagged behind male counterparts of similar background and training in such benchmarks of success as funding, space and research staff.

“There is no reason to believe that such a program would not be as successful at other academic medical centers as it has been at MGH,” says Tarbell. “In fact Harvard University is exploring a similar model to provide even more substantial startup funding for women in academics at the university.” Tarbell is the C.C. Wang Professor of Radiation Oncology at Harvard Medical School. The paper's co-authors are lead author Reshma Jagsi, MD, DPhil, now at

the University of Michigan Medical School, and Joan Butterson, MD, and Rebecca Starr, MBA, MSW, of MGH.

Massachusetts General Hospital, established in 1811, is the original and largest teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School. The MGH conducts the largest hospital-based research program in the United States, with an annual research budget of nearly \$500 million and major research centers in AIDS, cardiovascular research, cancer, computational and integrative biology, cutaneous biology, human genetics, medical imaging, neurodegenerative disorders, regenerative medicine, transplantation biology and photomedicine. MGH and Brigham and Women's Hospital are founding members of Partners HealthCare System, a Boston-based integrated health care delivery system.

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