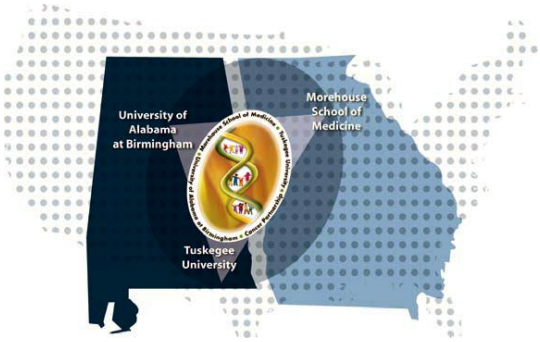
April 9, 2012

Researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham have received a five-year, $19 million National Cancer Institute renewal grant for the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center, Morehouse School of Medicine and Tuskegee University partnership to address cancer disparities among blacks.



“A complex interplay of economic, social and cultural factors influence cancer disparities, and we are working to understand it and determine methods to solve the problem,” says Upender Manne, Ph.D., lead principal investigator and professor in the UAB Department of Pathology.

“The vision of the partnership is to become nationally recognized for contributions to research and training and to eliminate cancer-health disparities, particularly in under-served regions,” Manne says. “With this renewal, the partnership will continue to bring the benefits of advances in cancer research to disadvantaged regional patient populations, influencing their lives for decades to come."

This tripartite research effort, initially funded by NCI as a cooperative grant in 2007, pairs federally designated, comprehensive cancer centers such as the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center with institutions of higher learning that historically serve minorities. MSM, TU and UAB are ideally situated in Alabama and Georgia, Southern states with high cancer-mortality rates.

Partnership activities include bench- and community-level cancer research focused on understanding the causes for cancer disparities plus education and training programs that encourage students to pursue biomedical sciences and link them with seasoned investigators within the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center.

The outreach program, which is at the core of the partnership, promotes cancer-awareness and healthy lifestyles among under-served populations and encourages minority participation in therapeutic clinical trials. The outreach program held colon-cancer screenings in the greater Atlanta area by MSM, increased physical activity and improved dietary choices among rural residents of the Tuskegee area by TU and more than doubled participation by blacks in therapeutic trials in the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center.

“The partnership also has been a significant influence leading to sustained, integrated and organizational changes at the three institutions,” says Edward Partridge, M.D., director of the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center and co-principal investigator. “It also has forged great relationships between the institutions and expanded opportunities for collaboration.”

The lead principal investigator at MSM is James Lillard, Ph. D., with co-principal investigator Daniel Blumenthal, M.D. At TU, the lead principal investigator is Timothy Turner, Ph.D., and co-principal investigator is Roberta Troy, Ph.D.

During the past five years, the partnership has trained 81 scholars to perform cancer-related research. Furthermore, each of the institutions has had substantial increases in cancer research funding. At MSM, funding increased to more than $26 million in 2011 from $8 million in 2000. During the same period, TU cancer research funding increased to more than $6 million from $2 million. The Cancer Control and Population Science Program at the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center increased to more than $22 million in 2011 from $12 million in 2005.

MSM has established a cancer-research program with 30 faculty from diverse scientific disciplines. TU has increased its capacity to conduct cancer research by training students and scientists who focus on eliminating cancer disparities and also developed two cancer-related courses for its curriculum. Also, the National Center for Bioethics in Research and Health Care at TU was established as a national resource for cancer-disparity programs. In the past five years, the UAB Cancer Center recruited six new faculty involved in research on cancer-health disparities.

Also, in the previous funding period, partnership investigators published more than 75 peer-reviewed manuscripts directly related to cancer disparities and received funding for 17 scientific projects.

“There’s a paradigm shift in the way community-based and academic research is planned and performed in the arena of health disparities,” says Mona Fouad, M.D., MPH, director of the UAB Minority Health and Research Center and a co-principal investigator. “These three institutions possess unique strengths for educating and training minority students, community health workers and faculty in conducting research to address cancer-health disparities.”

The UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center is among the 40 cancer centers in the nation to meet the stringent criteria for the National Cancer Institute's comprehensive designation. The center is a leader in groundbreaking research, reducing cancer disparities and leading-edge patient care.