

# *Penn Center for* Women's Behavioral Wellness

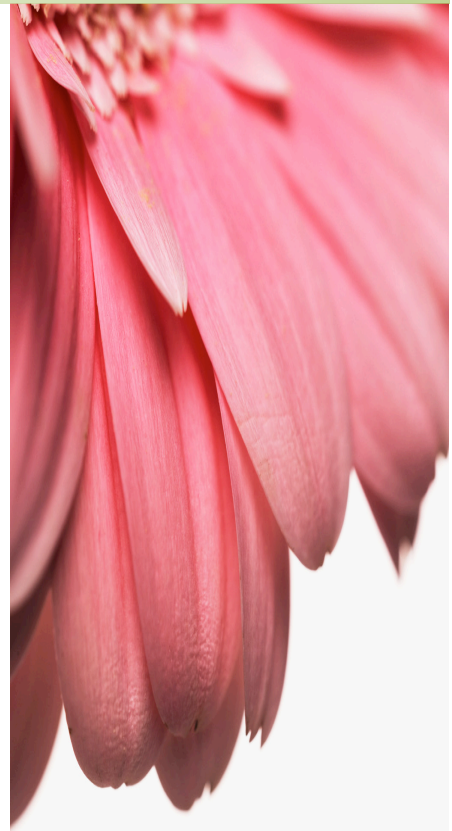
End of the Year 2013 Newsletter

## A Letter from the Director



Dear Colleagues and Friends:

With the holiday season upon us, I find myself reviewing the accomplishments of the previous year and considering our goals for the year to come. While we have met a number of important milestones in both the clinical and research missions of the Penn Center for Women's Behavioral Wellness (PCWBW), one that I would like to highlight at this "time of giving" is the uptick in participant recruitment for all of our studies. In this edition of the PCWBW Newsletter, Claudia Iannelli, one of our senior Clinical Research Coordinators, shares her personal story of what it is like to recruit and guide participants through research studies. Claudia mentions in her article the pleasure of working with individuals from diverse backgrounds who are volunteering their time because they believe their participation will



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## Director's Letter, continued

benefit women's health in the years to come. Without these women, and men (yes, we also study men), we would not be able to fully appreciate the differences between males and females with respect to brain health nor would we understand how best to treat mood and cognitive changes in women. On this note, I wish to dedicate this edition of the newsletter to those individuals who volunteer to participate in research and the members of the PCWBW Clinical Research Team who recruit them.

Over 200 people have presented for participation in our on-going research studies during this past year alone. Despite the ever increasing pace of modern life, our research participants contribute anywhere from 15 minutes to over 35 hours of their personal time over the course of an entire study. Some may be simply completing a questionnaire or two while waiting to see their doctor, while others may be devoting hours, over several days, as well as over several months. Regardless of the amount of time volunteered, being a research subject requires altruism, a desire to contribute to the well-being of others,

even if one does not themselves benefit from participation. While not everyone meets criteria for a particular study, we appreciate lengthy evaluation.

In addition to our research volunteers, the PCWBW Clinical Research Coordinators are the life's blood of our research mission. Without their unusual dedication, we could not be successful in our research endeavors. Our CRCs work tirelessly, often flexing their schedules to evenings and weekends in order to accommodate a participant who may be working full-time or caring for small children. Our CRCs are always encouraging and warm, making our Center a wonderful place to participate in research.

So during this season of generous giving, I wish to publicly thank our participants for their contribution to science and our research coordinators for their dedication to the individuals in our studies as well as the overall mission of our Center.

Happy Holidays-

*Neill*

### PCWBW Fun Fact:

The research team at the PCWBW studies men as well as women in order to study sex and gender differences on life experiences, cognition and smoking behavior.

For more information on research opportunities for men at the PCWBW, please call:  
**215-41-STUDY**

[Click here to be directed to the research section of our website](#)

## Spotlight: Sara Kornfield, PhD

In January I was delighted to join the Penn Center for Women's Behavioral Wellness as a Clinical Psychologist and Research Fellow. I received my doctoral degree in clinical psychology with a concentration in health psychology from Drexel University following a pre-doctoral internship with the Northport Veterans' Affairs Medical Center in New York. Returning to my roots in Philadelphia, I completed a two-year advanced post-doctoral fellowship in primary care-mental health integration at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, with a focus on developing brief interventions for the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in primary care settings.

I have always been interested in medical and mental health issues that are unique to women. My very first research job after graduating from Barnard

College involved collecting data using semi-structured questionnaires with women attending urban family planning clinics to assess their risk perception for HIV infection and their knowledge of safer sex practices. This experience gave me my first taste of how important it is to be aware of the intersection of health

behaviors and mental health status. While pursuing my PhD, my research focused on mood, HIV risk perception, and prenatal health care behaviors among low-income, minority pregnant women. Not surprisingly, I found that women with depression were less likely to engage in adequate prenatal health care behaviors. Furthermore, while conducting my dissertation study I realized how common psychological traumas are in this group of women.

I completed my internship at the VA in order to get more experience treating trauma and for the excellent training in evidence-based treatments for affective disorders, including posttraumatic stress disorder. Not wanting to lose sight of my goal of treating women during pregnancy, during my post-doctoral training, I initiated the Philadelphia VA's Perinatal Mental Health Screening Program to assess female Veterans' mental health status during their pregnancies and postpartum even while they received their prenatal care at outside facilities. I also developed and pilot tested a brief intervention for partial PTSD that can be delivered in primary care settings.



Sara Kornfield,  
PhD

*“Not surprisingly, I found women with depression were less likely to engage in adequate prenatal health care behaviors.”*

Since joining the PCWBW, I have taken on the role of Director of the Maternal Wellness Initiative (MWI), an integrated and co-located prenatal care-mental health integration program at the Helen O. Dickens Center for Women's Health at HUP. Here I am piloting my brief intervention among traumatized women during pregnancy to see whether the treatment has an effect on their level of symptoms and on birth outcomes. We know that active PTSD during pregnancy can lead to poor birth outcomes, however young, low-income, minority women generally don't seek out mental health care to address their psychological needs. The goal of this study, in collaboration with the MWI, is to offer these women a brief, focused psychological intervention that they can engage in within the trusted environment of their prenatal care setting, and that is convenient and accessible.

In addition to seeing clinical and research patients at the Dickens Center, I also see patients clinically at PCWBW. My clinical interests are in treating depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms during pregnancy and throughout the lifespan, and I use cognitive-behavioral and acceptance-based/mindfulness techniques.

For more information on Dr. Kornfield, please [click here](#) to be redirected to her PCWBW clinician profile page

## True Life: I'm a Clinical Research Coordinator

**Claudia Iannelli, M.S.**

"What do you do?"

This is a question we are used to hearing throughout our adult lives. Some careers have easy answers where no additional information is needed for someone to have a good idea of what you do for a living. Most people know immediately what a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, nurse, or police officer does at work on a daily basis. When I get asked this question I know inevitably my short answer will need to be followed-up with a much longer response. It usually goes something like this:

"I'm a clinical research coordinator (or CRC) at UPenn."

They respond, "Oh, that's interesting, what does that involve?"

At this point in the conversation, I typically give a brief description of my responsibilities: aiding doctors in developing and submitting new protocols, communicating with the FDA, screening and scheduling research participants, collecting and organizing data, supervising junior staff members and interns, creating on-line surveys, deciding when and where to advertise, contributing to publications such as this newsletter, and the list goes on. If the person I'm speaking with has not glazed over or stopped me because I've already tired them out, I tell them just how much I love my job because I get to do all of these varied things in the course of a week.

Certainly there are days that are a bit less exciting, such as those days when I feel like I'm attached to my computer by an invisible cord doing tedious data entry or modifying protocols. However, I know that other days I might not sit down until mid afternoon.

While it can be hectic, my job is stimulating and I believe that what I am doing will improve women's health in the future. Our job is basically to participate in the creation of new knowledge

to improve women's behavioral health.

Ok, so enough with the personal philosophy session and more about the job. The Penn Center for Women's Behavioral Wellness (PCWBW) has more than 20 current research studies, four full-time CRCs and three research assistants. The seven research staff members employed by the Center come from diverse educational backgrounds that include Bachelor's degrees in psychology, biology and political science and Master's degrees in cognition and neuropsychology and clinical and counseling psychology. We also have varied intellectual curiosities ranging from birth outcomes in women who were stressed early in life to the relationship between surgically-induced menopause and cognition in the years to follow.

Like our coordinators, our research studies are anything but homogenous. With the exception of having women as our primary study population, our studies examine depression and PTSD during pregnancy, the effects of hormones on smoking behavior, HIV and the stress responses, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, stress and overactive bladder syndrome, and the relationship between menopause and cognitive functioning, to mention a few.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't also tell you that one of the primary reasons that I love my job is that I help others contribute to the creation of new knowledge by recruiting them to be a research participant. I have met so many wonderful, altruistic, intellectually curious individuals who participate in our research studies primarily to advance the science of women's health. With my job as a clinical research coordinator, I have the opportunity to meet interesting people like Eileen, a recent research volunteer. This is what Eileen had to say about her experience with the Penn Center for Women's Behavioral Wellness research staff:

"During these experiences I have been treated with professional and courteous care. The staff has provided clear and precise information with

## True Life: CRC, continued

each phase during the study process. I hope my participation will be a beneficial contribution in this research and help provide insight into a given area of healthcare concern. I would highly recommend participation in these research efforts to others.”

Another participant named Diane valued the altruistic aspect of being involved in research:

“Having the opportunity to ‘pay it forward’ is important to me, especially in the area of women’s health,” she said. “From my first interaction with PCWBW, my coordinator was professional and very welcoming. Any initial nervousness on my part was completely calmed, as she answered all of my questions and made it easy to accommodate my schedule. Her enthusiasm about the project was infectious and made me feel like I was part of something bigger than myself. I welcome the opportunity to assist in future research projects with PCWBW.”

In an e-article for Penn Medicine, Dr. Jun Mao described the principal investigator as the “brains” and the coordinators as the “hands” of research – and we couldn’t agree more. The research coordinators at the PCWBW appreciate our Center’s “brain,” for with her Southern charm and charismatic energy, Dr. Epperson is truly unique among principal investigators and Center Directors.

Her open and nurturing personality allows us to be upfront about our professional and personal needs and concerns. Dr. Epperson also finds great joy in our successes. She’s the first to offer congratulations on accomplishments from recruiting the last participant for a study or handling a particularly difficult professional situation to personal life events like engagements, weddings and new babies. Above all, it’s easy to be productive when you believe your employer cares not only about the data, but about those who collect it.

When asked for her take on her research staff, Dr. Epperson said, “I believe that I am the luckiest principal investigator at Penn. My research staff members are truly gifted in their interactions with our research participants. We are able to conduct longitudinal studies with many complex procedures without losing participants along the way, in large part due to our coordinators’ efficient but warm interpersonal style. They know our participants are short on time and are being altruistic to volunteer for our studies. The Center’s coordinators do their very best to schedule visits when it is convenient for the participant even if it means flexing their own schedules. This level of commitment is invaluable to the success of our Center’s research mission.”

### *Meet our Research Staff:*



#### **Pictured from left to right:**

- Jeanette Bradley, BA – CRC
- Sarah Conlin, BA – CRC
- Amy Weiss, BS – Research Assistant
- Claudia Iannelli, MS – CRC
- Jessica Snell, MS – Research Assistant
- Lisa Lamprou, BA – CRC

#### **Not Pictured:**

- Carla Golden, BS - Research Assistant

## 2013: A Year in Review

### Kathryn Zagrabbe, BA

I am a Penn medical student who recently completed a year of research at the Penn Center for Women's Behavioral Wellness. After completing my third year of medical school, I joined the PCWBW team with the support of the Doris Duke Clinical Research Fellowship, a national program that funds medical students to complete a year of clinical research in an area of their choosing.

My interest in women's health has been life-long. My nine years at an all-girls school made me especially impassioned to promote and serve the needs of women. I am also very interested in child and adolescent psychiatry. As I became immersed in the clinical experiences of medical school, it became quite obvious that it is impossible to divide women's mental health and child psychiatry into two distinct categories.

The mother-child relationship is reciprocal, and the wellness of one truly depends on the other.

Over the past year, I worked on a PCWBW research study that examines how the early adverse life events of mothers influence the development of their infants, even as early as *in utero*. I spent my year recruiting participants for the study, helping conduct psychiatric assessments, reviewing past literature on the topic, and even learning how to read fetal ultrasounds. We recently presented the study's initial findings at the Perinatal Mental Health Meeting in Chicago, and we hope to present more of the results in the spring. It was an absolute privilege to work with the PCWBW team. I look forward to applying what I learned this past year to my future work as a psychiatrist.

## 2013 Publications

Hospitalization and Cognitive Decline: Can the Nature of the Relationship Be Deciphered?  
Mathews SB, Epperson CN, Arnold SE. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry*. 2013 Feb 6.

New onset of bipolar disorder in late life. Carlino AR, Stinnett JL, Kim DR. *Psychosomatics*.  
2013 Jan-Feb;54(1):94-7. doi: 10.1016/j.psych.2012.01.006. Epub 2012 May 30.

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder and the brain. Epperson CN. *Am J Psychiatry*. 2013 Mar  
1;170(3):248-52. doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2012.12121555.

For access to all publications  
by the PCWBW staff, please  
**click here** to be redirected  
to the publications  
section of our website.

**Did You Know:**  
The PCWBW staff has collectively  
published more than 200 papers  
in peer-reviewed journals.

## Other Accomplishments in 2013



### Postpartum Depression Treatment

*CBS Philly's* John McDevitt interviewed Dr. Lindsay Sortor regarding treatment for postpartum depression

### PMS and the DSM

*NPR* interviewed Dr. Epperson to discuss her thoughts on severe PMS/PMDD being classified as a mental health disorder



### TMS and Positive Experience

A previous research participant of Dr. Deborah Kim spoke with *NBC 10 News* about her experience with the TMS and depression in pregnancy research team



### The New Normal: Life After Cancer

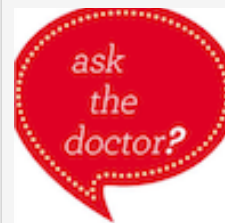
*A Woman's Health* e-publication *Ask the Doctor* featured Dr. Sortor, who weighed in on topics from the psychological effects of a

cancer diagnosis on the patient to the important role of caregivers and partners



### Treating Depression During Pregnancy

Dr. Epperson was interviewed for a March 2013 article in *Fit Pregnancy*, which discussed how expectant mothers can help fight depression during pregnancy



### "The questions you always wanted to ask your mother..."

Dr. Epperson spoke at the *Fountain House Associates* 3rd annual Spring breakfast entitled "Between The Sheets." Dr. Epperson spoke about various topics including age and sex drive, medications that affect sexual behavior and treatment options for common sexual dysfunctions



### Appointed Editor in Chief

Dr. Liisa Hantsoo, PhD was named Editor in Chief of the University of Pennsylvania's Biomedical Postdoctoral Newsletter

### Faculty Recognition Award

Dr. Sarah Mathews has received the 2013 Albert Stunkard Faculty Recognition Award. This award is given annually to four faculty members who are outstanding teachers and mentors

*We hope you enjoyed this edition of the PCWBW Newsletter. If you have comments, questions or suggestions for future content, please email Claudia Iannelli at [sclaud@mail.med.upenn.edu](mailto:sclaud@mail.med.upenn.edu).*

*As always, we appreciate your interest in Women's Behavioral Health and look forward to being able to improve healthcare one day at a time.*