

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE

WOMEN AND RENAL DISEASE
September 14–17, 1999

PROGRAM CHAIRS

Christine K. Abrass, M.D.

Paul L. Kimmel, M.D.

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INTRODUCTION

More than 120,000 women in the United States have end-stage renal disease (ESRD), and many more women suffer from chronic renal insufficiency (CRI). Yet our knowledge about renal disease in women is limited. Epidemiologic data show that women are prone to develop certain renal diseases. Even in cases where disease risk is comparable between men and women, the rate of disease progression differs. Both sex- and gender-based differences in the response to pharmacologic agents and access to treatment modalities influence outcomes of renal disease in women.

To address these important differences in renal disease in women, four targeted areas were discussed.

- The first focused on the definition of sex-specific physiology, including the basic biology of estrogen and other sex steroids, their impact on immune system function, and their contribution to disease risk and progression.
- Specific effects of sex steroids on the vascular system were the second area of focus. The effects of estrogen on blood vessel development and function have important implications during glomerulogenesis, during development of the placenta, and during fetal growth. In addition, estrogen influences the development of vascular complications in women with renal failure.
- Clinical aspects of renal disease in women with CRI included discussions about diseases that do not usually progress to ESRD but do require sex-specific evaluation and treatment.
- The final section addressed the unique needs of women with renal failure, including complications and barriers to care. Targeted basic and clinical research is necessary to improve our understanding of sex-related differences in renal disease and its treatment and to improve women's health.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Participants agreed on five overarching priorities throughout the conference.

Expand Research Beyond Estrogen Effects. Some information is available regarding the role of estrogen in renal disease risk and progression; yet estrogen is only one factor determining female sex. As studies define the influence of sex on renal disease, basic and clinical research should include studies of progesterone, gonadotropins and other hormones that differ between men and women.

Expand Research on Sex Steroids and the Vessel Wall. Given the profound influence of sex steroids on the vascular system, this area of research has broad clinical implications for women with renal disease. Sex steroids affect placental development and the intrauterine environment, which has recently been correlated with future risk for renal disease and hypertension. Knowledge of biology of the vasculature is essential to understanding normal renal development and the initiation of and response to glomerular disease. Finally, abnormalities in the pituitary–gonadal axis that accompany renal disease may contribute to accelerated atherosclerosis in women with renal disease. For these reasons, studies of the effects of sex steroids on the vasculature should receive special attention.

Expand Research on Pharmacokinetics, Pharmacodynamics, and Therapeutic Efficacy. Drug metabolism differs between men and women and is affected by changes in renal function. No guidelines exist for the specific adjustment of drug dosing in women with renal disease. Because of fundamental differences in the physiology and pathophysiology of hypertension and renal disease in men and women, the efficacy of standard treatment regimens must be assessed in women.

Expand Research on a Woman's Lifecycle. Studies related to women and renal disease must consider the woman's lifecycle stage. Puberty may be delayed in girls with renal disease, and women with renal disease may have amenorrhea or early menopause. Thus, chronological age is an inadequate predictor of the physiological lifecycle stage of women with renal disease. Standard criteria should be established to define the stage of the lifecycle so that data can be compared between studies, and so that treatments can be appropriately adjusted for lifecycle stage.

Expand Research on Barriers to Care. Current studies suggest that women with renal disease do not have equal access to certain treatment modalities. Thus, special attention must be paid to the care of women with renal disease. In particular, attitudinal and psychosocial barriers to care must be addressed because they influence treatment options and outcomes for women with renal disease.

AREAS OF RESEARCH NEED

Basic Biology of Sex Steroids in Renal Disease, Disease Risk, and Autoimmunity

*Mary H. Foster, M.D.
Susan E. Mulroney, Ph.D.*

Observations in experimental models and humans indicate that sex influences the onset, course and rate of progression of renal disease. Male sex is a risk factor for more rapid progression in a variety of chronic nephropathies. Conversely, women have a higher incidence of autoimmune disorders associated with severe nephritis such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). Our understanding of sex bias in renal disease and autoimmunity and interactions between sex hormones and the kidney is rudimentary. Fundamental research is needed to determine the precise hormonal, cellular, and molecular mechanisms for sex differences in disease initiation, severity and progression. The long-term objective is to identify and characterize mechanisms by which sex-linked factors affect normal renal homeostasis and modulate pathophysiologic processes. Characterization of these mechanisms will facilitate the development of rational, sex-specific interventions.

Specific Research Needs

Sex Steroids and the Kidney. The definition of estrogen's effect on the normal kidney should include its influence on hemodynamics, transport processes, growth and differentiation, and extracellular matrix metabolism. Differences in these responses during renal development and at different stages in the woman's lifecycle should be included. Renal estrogen receptor expression and the role of receptor modulators, both co-activators and co-repressors, must be defined. The field must also characterize the processes of transcriptional regulation and cell signaling within the kidney, as renal-specific mechanisms may exist. The examination of basic receptor biology in the kidney should not be limited to estrogen, as other sexually dimorphic hormones such as testosterone, progesterone, and prolactin may also have important effects.

Lifecycle Determinants. Investigators should define sex differences and distinctions among women with renal disease at various life stages for each area of study. Chronologic age may not reliably reflect the stage of the lifecycle for women with renal disease. Standard criteria should be established to define lifecycle stages, and studies should include staging and its impact on interpretation of data.

Sex Hormones and Immune Function. Basic research is needed to characterize the sex differences in immune responsiveness in humans. The effects of sex hormones on systemic immune function and the immune function of intrinsic renal cells need to be defined. As disease often disturbs the pituitary–gonadal axis, secondary disorders in sex biology may abrogate or compound the effects of sex steroids on immune system function. These effects, as well as the physiologic stage in a woman's lifecycle, must be considered when designing studies and interpreting data. When researchers examine gender differences in

kidney disease, they must study models of (1) autoimmunity such as SLE, Heymann nephritis and anti-glomerular basement membrane disease; (2) transplantation; and (3) acquired immunity.

Estrogen and Renal Injury. Investigators must elucidate the association of female sex and the risk of development and rate of progression of renal disease by identifying appropriate disease models that reflect human sex disparities. Using these models, the role of sex steroids (estrogen, progesterone and testosterone) in the cellular and molecular mechanisms of renal injury needs to be defined. Studies examining the effect of sex steroids on mechanisms of renal injury should include renal hemodynamics, transport processes, apoptosis, fibrosis, hypertrophy, hyperplasia, and growth factor and cytokine expression.

Pregnancy and Renal Disease. Pregnancy influences the rate of progression of certain pre-existing renal diseases. Thus, researchers must define the role of pregnancy-associated changes in sieving coefficients, lipid profiles, renal perfusion and other factors that influence the rate of progression. Conversely, certain renal diseases uniquely occur during pregnancy and influence fetal outcome and future renal function in the mother. It will be important to identify animal models to investigate the development and progression of pregnancy-induced renal disease.

Fetal Programming. Epidemiological data suggest that intrauterine development influences future risk for development of obesity, hypertension and renal insufficiency. Basic information is needed regarding the mechanisms of fetal programming of adult renal disease. It will be important to determine the role of genomic imprinting and effects of nutritional and hormonal status during pregnancy on the development of renal disease in offspring.

Transplantation. Additional basic information is needed about sex-specific immunology involved in graft rejection and survival. Sex-based differences in complications of immunosuppression and the implications of a woman's lifecycle stage on transplantation success and complications have not been defined. The potential special needs of pregnant women should also be a research priority.

Summary

Studies must characterize estrogen receptor biology in the kidney. Research should elucidate the interactions between estrogen and other hormones and their effects on the kidney in normal and pathophysiologic states. Sex stratification should be performed in experimental models and studies that include men and women. Studies should include *in vivo*, *in vitro* and human biopsy material when appropriate.

Role of Sex Steroids in Renal Disease Progression and Impact on the Vessel Wall

Christine K. Abrass, M.D.

Michael T. McMaster, Ph.D.

The effects of sex steroids on the vessel wall play such an important role in nephrogenesis, normal renal physiology, pathophysiology, initiation and progression of renal disease, and the high mortality from cardiovascular disease in patients with ESRD that studies in this field are a priority. The limited availability of basic information about the fundamental physiology of the woman's lifecycle hampers understanding of the impact of estrogens on the vessel wall. It is essential to get fundamental data before mechanistic experiments can be well designed.

Specific Research Needs

Sex Steroids and Blood Vessels. Sex steroids play an important role in the regulation of blood vessel development. Angiogenesis is stimulated by estrogen and repressed by progesterone. Appropriately regulated angiogenesis is crucial to normal development of the renal vasculature and the glomerulus. Similar mechanisms may be important in the initiation and evolution of glomerular injury. Yet little is known about the specific effects of sex steroids on the formation and function of blood vessels in the kidney. As active angiogenesis sustains tumor growth, the role of sex steroids on blood vessels in the kidney has important implications for understanding and controlling the growth of renal tumors.

Blood Vessel Formation and Pregnancy. Sex steroids influence the development of the placenta, which influences the risk for pre-eclampsia. Little is known about the basic mechanisms leading to eclampsia and relationships to systemic abnormalities in the vessel wall and within the kidney. In addition to renal complications in women with eclampsia, placental abnormalities contribute to intrauterine growth retardation. As this is associated with future risk for renal disease and hypertension in the offspring, investigators should conduct basic studies of the impact of sex steroids on blood vessel development in the placenta.

Sex Steroids and Renal Disease Progression. The glomerulus is a specialized blood vessel unit that is physiologically and pathophysiologically influenced by insulin, insulin-like growth factor-1, angiotensin II, nitric oxide and other mediators that are modulated by sex steroids. Research is needed to define the mechanisms responsible for these effects in order to understand sex-based differences in rates of progression of renal disease.

Sex Steroids and Lipids. Lipids play an important role in the rate of progression of renal disease and in generalized vascular disease that is responsible for the high morbidity and mortality among patients with renal failure. Sex steroids modulate the synthesis, blood levels and clearance of lipids. Additional information is needed to define the role of these effects in renal disease progression. Improved understanding of these basic mechanisms is necessary for defining appropriate hormone replacement therapy for women with renal disease and estrogen deficiency.

Sex Steroids, Blood Vessels and Complications of ESRD. Basic researchers should elucidate the interrelationships of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease and lipid/lipoprotein metabolism and renal disease in women. Studies defining the relationship of sex hormones and the impact of CRI on lipid metabolism and atherosclerotic disease will be crucial to outlining treatments. The choice of therapy and drug dose for women and men will likely differ. In women, vascular accesses for hemodialysis have a particular propensity to develop thrombi. Yet little is known about histological or other differences between men and women with access failure.

Summary

Considerable evidence shows that men and women differ in their risk for vascular disease. Yet there is inadequate understanding of the basic mechanisms responsible for this difference or the impact of these factors on the initiation and progression of renal disease. Research should focus on the role of sex steroids in blood vessel growth and atherosclerosis, and their implications for renal disease progression and the risk of complications.

Clinical Research Needs for Women With Chronic Renal Insufficiency

Bonita Falkner, M.D.

Sandra P. Levison, M.D.

In the field of nephrology there are many areas in which women have medical and psychosocial needs that differ from men. Early in the course of CRI, women develop abnormalities of the pituitary–gonadal axis that influence fertility and sexual function. In turn, abnormalities in sex steroid metabolism may contribute to the progression of renal disease and the development of other complications such as vascular and bone disease. Considerable work is needed to elucidate the manifestations of this relationship and to develop clinical interventions to preserve renal function. Moreover, women have a greater propensity to develop bladder dysfunction, interstitial cystitis, analgesic nephropathy and urinary tract infections, which make these important areas for clinical research.

Specific Research Needs

Drug Therapy. There are substantial gaps in research examining drug therapies in women with renal disease over the lifecycle. Research is needed on drug pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics related to the level of renal function, the stage of the menstrual cycle, exogenous hormone use, pregnancy, and body composition and size. Investigators must also better define drug safety during pregnancy. Further research must be conducted on the cytotoxicity of drugs in women with renal disease to determine the effects on fertility, teratogenesis, and perinatal development and outcome. A better understanding of gender issues regarding body image and communication may improve acceptance of treatment.

Biological and Psychosocial Consequences of CRI. Little is known about sex differences in systemic or extra-renal organ function in people with CRI. Research must define hypogonadism in women with CRI and examine sex differences in gonadal function,

including sexual function. The full range of benefits of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and its influence on blood pressure and progression of renal disease is unknown. More information is needed to describe sex differences in the incidence and development of sleep apnea and cardiovascular disease (particularly hypertension) in people with renal disease.

Psychosocial issues must be considered in women with CRI. Women with CRI need special counseling about family planning, pregnancy and long-term outcomes in their children. Women with CRI also may need special counseling about body image, eating disorders, sexual function and libido.

Bladder Dysfunction. Nephropathy affects bladder function. More research is needed on the unique issues relevant to women and bladder dysfunction. Researchers must determine the factors that lead to incontinence; the role of pregnancy and delivery in the etiology of incontinence; and the roles of estrogen, exercise, and diet in bladder dysfunction in women. A better understanding of mechanisms underlying the development of urinary tract infection, new diagnostic tools and innovative preventive and treatment strategies are needed.

Diabetic Nephropathy. Research is needed on sex differences involved in the pathogenesis of diabetes and diabetic nephropathy. The possibility that target blood pressure levels should be lower in women with diabetic nephropathy requires investigation. Our understanding of whether the mechanisms and determinants of progression of diabetic nephropathy in men and women are different is rudimentary. To improve the outcome of diabetic nephropathy, the role of sex steroids in progression and the role of insulin resistance in disease pathogenesis in women need to be defined.

Analgesic and Lead Nephropathy. Underlying mechanisms and the treatment of specific nephropathies in women must be better understood. Research is needed on the role of gender as a risk factor for analgesic abuse. The role of sex steroids in the pathogenesis and progression of analgesic and lead nephropathy need to be studied.

Preventing Progression of CRI. The reasons for disparities in renal disease progression rates between men and women are unknown. Specific effects of estrogen or testosterone (or interrelationships between the sex hormones) on the determinants of proteinuria or renal cell responses to injury may explain sex differences in progression rate in patients with CRI. Alternatively, differences in treatment or responses to treatment may contribute to this difference. Research is needed to examine the effect of angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, angiotensin receptor blockers, spironolactone and calcium channel blockers on the progression of renal disease in women. Investigators should also identify effective markers that predict progression of renal disease in women.

Obesity, nutrition, and eating disorders might influence the progression of renal disease. The effects of body mass index and/or adipose mass, appetite suppressants, and weight loss–gain cycles on the progression of chronic renal failure are unknown. The relationship of birth weight and obesity on the development of renal disease should be examined. Finally, researchers should define psychosocial issues that influence adherence to dietary recommendations.

Bone and Cardiovascular Disease. Prevention of bone and cardiovascular disease are important issues for women with CRI. Although some data are available in women with ESRD, it is likely that these complications of renal failure begin much earlier in the course of the disease. Early detection of bone disease requires good markers and a better understanding of risk factors. More research is needed on treatment strategies for bone disease in women with CRI. Screening for cardiovascular disease in women with renal disease must be improved. Research to prevent the development of cardiovascular disease should focus on metabolic determinants of disorders of plasma homocysteine and lipids; the effects of diet, nutrition and drugs on homocysteine and lipid levels; and the change in incidence of cardiovascular disease associated with interventions.

Primary Care. Attention should be directed at health promotion and disease prevention in women in high-risk populations, including substance abusers, those who have experienced domestic abuse and depression, and those who are caring for others.

Summary

Women experience a variety of special forms of renal disease, which require research in order to improve their health. Each disease must be considered in the context of a woman's physiologic stage in life, as each stage may differentially impact the progression of renal disease. Furthermore, women metabolize and clear drugs differently from men, and therapeutic responses may differ also. For these reasons, research must specifically address the pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, and therapeutic responses in women with renal disease.

Epidemiology, Management, and Complications of End-Stage Renal Disease in Women

Catherine O. Stehman-Breen, M.D.

Paul L. Kimmel, M.D.

Women with ESRD are at increased risk for developing cardiovascular disease, bone disease, and cognitive dysfunction compared to the general population. Gender differences exist among dialysis patients with regard to modality choice, vascular access procedures and outcomes, and access to transplantation. Reasons for these disparities are not understood and interventions that may eliminate them have not been defined. The etiology of disparities is likely multifactorial, and may include hypogonadism, other biochemical factors, socioeconomic status and culture.

Specific Research Needs

Management of ESRD. Little is known about the management of ESRD in women. Current data suggest women treated with peritoneal dialysis are at higher risk of infectious and non-cardiac death compared to men. The causes underlying these differences should be investigated. Vascular access survival is lower among women than men. Although long-term outcomes for autogenous fistulas are superior to those for synthetic grafts, women are

more likely than men to have grafts. The smaller caliber of women's veins, delayed referral to the nephrologist and vascular surgeon, and physician choice may play a role in graft placement. The reasons for this and the secondary impact on long-term outcomes are not known.

Transplantation. Women are more likely to donate kidneys compared to men but are less likely to undergo renal transplantation. Women may donate organs more frequently than men because of family structure and dynamics, economic factors, or socialization differences. Gender disparities in transplantation could be the result of physical and social barriers for women, such as lower socioeconomic status, physician bias, patient preference, social biases, and medical factors such as higher comorbidity or anti-lymphocyte antibodies. Researchers should examine the special medical problems in women, including graft outcomes, optimal immunosuppression, complications of immunosuppressive therapy, disease recurrence, and the impact of transplantation on fertility, pregnancy outcomes, and teratogenesis.

Primary Care. There are no guidelines for the proper timing of routine screenings such as mammograms and PAP smears for women with renal disease. It is essential for researchers to determine if routine screening for breast, cervical and colon cancer are cost-effective and life saving in this population of patients.

Sexual Function. Women with ESRD have abnormal menstrual cycles and fertility, including dysfunction of prolactin, estrogen, FSH and LH. The cause(s) are unknown. Research should focus on the impact of hormone abnormalities on the menstrual cycle and fertility. In addition, research should determine if a higher dialysis dose, mode of dialysis delivery, or erythropoietin use and hematocrit level would improve menstrual irregularities and fertility. It is also not known if menstrual abnormalities and infertility result from abnormalities in hormones of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis or have another cause. Studies are needed to determine if outcomes among women with amenorrhea differ from those in menopause. More research is needed to determine the contribution of psychosocial factors and cultural differences to menstrual abnormalities and in fertility.

Hormone Replacement Therapy. Women with ESRD experience premature menopause. However, little is known about the benefits and risks of HRT among women with ESRD. Although the pharmacokinetics of estrogen and progesterone have not been well studied in women with ESRD, data suggest that estrogen doses need to be reduced. Investigations of women with ESRD should determine if HRT improves quality of life and modulates the incidence and progression of cardiovascular disease. Other areas of potential interest include the effects of HRT on lipid metabolism, vascular reactivity, incidence of central obesity, dementia, and overall survival. HRT in women with ESRD might also decrease the incidence or severity of bone diseases such as osteoporosis and renal osteodystrophy and reduce the risk of hip and vertebral fracture. Because HRT might also increase the risk of vascular access thrombosis, pulmonary embolus and deep vein thrombosis, investigators should determine how to monitor women treated with HRT.

Incidence, Outcomes, and Barriers to Care. More information about the incidence of ESRD in women compared with men is needed. Researchers should determine whether observed gender differences are due to biologic factors, selection bias or patient preferences.

The characteristics of women with ESRD must be described. In addition, differences in outcomes of women with ESRD compared to men should be identified and the causes determined. Specifically, investigators should describe the impact of differences in physiologic mediators, hospitalization rates, and socioeconomic status between men and women on outcomes related to treatment.

Summary

Women with ESRD lose the protective effect from cardiovascular disease that most women enjoy compared to men. Sex steroid disorders in renal failure may be only partially responsible for the increased risk for cardiovascular complications. Research should address the clinical and therapeutic aspects of ESRD complications in women. Access to care and choice of treatment modalities differ between men and women. Differences need to be defined and interventions need to be developed to improve the care of women with renal failure.

CONCLUSION

This report outlines research that will improve our understanding of the pathogenesis and complications of renal disease in women. Our goal is to improve treatments and outcomes for women with renal disease. Both basic and clinical studies must consider (1) expansion of research beyond estrogen effects; (2) sex steroids and the vessel wall; (3) pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, and therapeutic efficacy; (4) the importance of a woman's lifecycle; and (5) barriers to care.

Basic Research Tools Needed. Research on renal disease in women is critical, but the field faces many barriers. Research is hindered by the expense of performing studies on both males and females. New animal models that reflect the sexual dimorphisms exhibited by humans need to be developed and characterized. Spontaneous and induced animal models of renal disease, including animals with genetic variability in estrogen and progesterone responses, will be necessary to differentiate the effect of variables associated with sex. Improved approaches using cultured cells of defined male or female origin, especially cultured human kidney cells, and transfected cells should advance research on renal disease in women. Also, investigators need to develop methods to correlate *in vitro* and *in vivo* observations.

Clinical Research Tools Needed. Clinical researchers require access to large databases to advance our understanding of sex- and gender-related differences in renal disease. Sex-specific data on drug pharmacokinetics and drug interactions are needed. Improved markers of gonadal function in women with renal disease will allow researchers to establish the relationship between gonadal function, progression of renal disease and complications of renal failure. Methods to determine fertility are needed. Clinical research studies require reliable definitions of renal function relative to sex and body size and reliable definitions of blood pressure level versus risk for women across lifecycles. Standardized approaches to using HRT and selective estrogen-receptor modulators may enhance our ability to generalize results from clinical studies in women without renal disease. A central database for patients with CRI, tools to detect early bone disease, and gender-specific screening tools for lead and analgesic nephropathy are desirable.

Finally, training new basic science and clinical investigators will be fundamental to increasing the knowledge base and improving the care and quality of life of women with renal disease.

PLANNING COMMITTEE

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Christine K. Abrass, M.D.

Chief of Immunonephrology

Professor of Medicine

University of Washington School of
Medicine

VA Puget Sound Health Care System

1660 South Columbian Way

Seattle, WA 98108

Phone: (206) 764-2002

Fax: (206) 764-2153

E-mail: cabrass@u.washington.edu

Josephine P. Briggs, M.D.

Director, Division of Kidney, Urologic,
and Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK

Building 31, Room 9A17

Bethesda, MD 20892

Phone: (301) 496-6325

Fax: (301) 402-4874

E-mail: briggsj@extra.niddk.nih.gov

Bonita Falkner, M.D.

Professor of Medicine and Pediatrics

Department of Medicine

MCP-Hahnemann School of Medicine

3300 Henry Avenue

Philadelphia, PA 19129

Phone: (215) 842-7142

Fax: (215) 849-7168

E-mail: falknerb@auhs.edu

Paul L. Kimmel, M.D.

Director Diabetic Nephropathy Program

Division of Kidney, Urologic, and

Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK

6707 Democracy Boulevard, Suite 607

Bethesda, MD 20892-5458

Phone: (301) 594-7717

Fax: (301) 480-3510

E-mail: kimmelp@extra.niddk.nih.gov

Michael T. McMaster, Ph.D.

Assistant Adjunct Professor

Department of Stomatology

University of California, San Francisco

513 Parnassus Avenue, HSW 604

San Francisco, CA 94143-0512

Phone: (415) 514-0172

Fax: (415) 502-7338

E-mail: mcmaster@cgl.ucsf.edu

Vivian W. Pinn, M.D.

Director, Office of Research

on Women's Health, NIH

Building 1, Room 201

One Center Drive, MSC 0161

Bethesda, MD 20892-0161

Phone: (301) 402-1770

Fax: (301) 402-1798

E-mail: pinnv@od.nih.gov

SPEAKERS

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Office of Research on Women's Health

Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

Christine K. Abrass, M.D.

Chief of Immunonephrology
Professor of Medicine
University of Washington School of
Medicine
VA Puget Sound Health Care System
1660 South Columbian Way
Seattle, WA 98108
Phone: (206) 764-2002
Fax: (206) 764-2153
E-mail: cabrass@u.washington.edu

Welcome and Chair, *Estrogen and the Vessel Wall*

Sanjay Asthana, M.D., F.R.C.P. (c)

Research Assistant Professor
Department of Medicine
University of Washington School of
Medicine
GRECC (182 B)
VA Puget Sound Health Care System
American Lake Division
Tacoma, WA 98693-5000
Phone: (253) 582-8440, ext. 6925
Fax: (253) 589-4073
E-mail: sasthana@u.washington.edu

Neuromodulatory and Neuroprotective Effects of Estrogen in the Brain

Christine Baylis, Ph.D.

Professor of Physiology
Department of Physiology
West Virginia University
3051 Health Science Center
P.O. Box 9229
Morgantown, WV 26506-9229
Phone: (304) 293-1499
Fax: (304) 293-3973
E-mail: cbaylis@wvu.edu

The Impact of Pregnancy on Progression of Renal Disease and Chair, The Role of Sex in Progression of Kidney Disease

Wendy Bloembergen, M.D.

Assistant Professor of Medicine
University of Michigan
315 West Huron Street, Suite 240
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
Phone: (517) 351-2071
Fax: (517) 351-2071
E-mail: wbloembe@umich.edu

The Role of Gender in Incidence, Treatment, and Outcomes of ESRD

Josephine P. Briggs, M.D.
 Director, Division of Kidney,
 Urologic and Hematologic Diseases,
 NIDDK
 National Institutes of Health
 Building 31, Room 9A17
 31 Center Drive
 Bethesda, MD 20892
 Phone: (301) 496-6325
 Fax: (301) 402-4874
 E-mail: briggsj@extra.niddk.nih.gov

Welcome and Concluding Remarks

Michael Brown, Ph.D.
 Assistant Professor
 Center for Molecular Medicine
 Emory University School of Medicine
 420 B Dental Building
 1462 Clifton Road
 Atlanta, GA 30322
 Phone: (404) 727-8358
 Fax: (404) 727-8367
 E-mail: mdbrown@gmm.gen.emory.edu

***The Eve Within Each of Us:
 Mitochondrial DNA***

George P. Chrousos, M.D.
 Chief, Pediatric Endocrinology Section
 National Institute of Child Health and
 Human Development
 National Institutes of Health
 Building 10, Room 10N260
 Bethesda, MD 20892-1862
 Phone: (301) 496-5800
 Fax: (301) 402-0574
 E-mail: chrousog@mail.nih.gov

***Interactions Between the
 Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis
 and the Female Reproductive System
 in Women With Renal Disease:
 Clinical Implications***

Allan J. Collins, M.D., F.A.C.P.
 Director, Nephrology Analytical Services
 University of Minnesota–Hennepin
 County Medical Center
 914 South Eighth Street, Suite D-206
 Minneapolis, MN 55404
 Phone: (612) 347-5811
 Fax: (612) 347-5878
 E-mail: acollins@nephrology.org

***Survival in Female and Male Dialysis
 Patients***

Bonita Falkner, M.D.
 Professor of Medicine and Pediatrics
 Department of Medicine
 MCP–Hahnemann School of Medicine
 3300 Henry Avenue
 Philadelphia, PA 19129
 Phone: (215) 842-7142
 Fax: (215) 849-7168
 E-mail: falknerb@auhs.edu

***Special Problems in the Management
 of Hypertension in Women,” Chair,
 Epidemiology of Renal Disease in
 Women and Cochair, “Clinical
 Research Needs for Women with
 Renal Disease (Other than ESRD)***

Mary H. Foster, M.D.
 Assistant Professor of Medicine
 Renal-Electrolyte and Hypertension
 Division
 University of Pennsylvania
 700 Clinical Research Building
 415 Curie Boulevard
 Philadelphia, PA 19104-6144
 Phone: (215) 573-1838
 Fax: (215) 898-0189
 E-mail: fosterma@mail.med.upenn.edu

***Cochair, Basic Biology of Estrogens in
 Renal Disease, Disease Risk, and
 Autoimmunity***

William L. Henrich, M.D.

Theodore E. Woodward Professor and
Chairman
Department of Medicine
University of Maryland School
of Medicine
University of Maryland Hospital
22 South Greene Street, N3W42
Baltimore, MD 21201
Phone: (410) 328-2488
Fax: (410) 328-8688
E-mail: whenrich@medicine.
umaryland.edu

Analgesic Nephropathy**Sylvia Curtis Hewitt, M.A.**

National Institute of Environmental
Health Sciences
National Institutes of Health
P.O. Box 12233
111 Alexander Drive
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709
Phone: (919) 541-3429
Fax: (919) 541-0696
E-mail: curtiss@niehs.nih.gov

Estrogen Receptors**Susan Hou, M.D.**

Director, Renal Fellowship Program
Rush Presbyterian-St. Luke's
Medical Center
Rush Medical College
1653 West Congress Parkway
Chicago, IL 60612
Phone: (312) 942-6463
Fax: (312) 942-2881
E-mail: shou@rush.edu

***The Impact of Renal Disease on
Pregnancy Outcomes and Chair,
Pregnancy and Preeclampsia*****Julie R. Ingelfinger, M.D.**

Chief, Pediatric-Nephrology
Harvard University
Massachusetts General Hospital
ACC 709 – Pediatric-Nephrology
15 Parkman Street
Boston, MA 02114
Phone: (617) 726-2908
Fax: (617) 726-3044
E-mail: ingelfinger@helix.mgh.
harvard.edu

Estrogen and Angiotensin II**Louisa Iruela-Arispe, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor
Molecular Biology Institute
University of California, Los Angeles
611 Charles Young Drive East
Los Angeles, CA 90095
Phone: (310) 794-5763
Fax: (310) 794-5766
E-mail: arispe@mbi.ucla.edu

Sex Steroids and Angiogenesis**Camille Jones, M.D., M.P.H.**

Director, Epidemiology Program
Division of Kidney, Urologic, and
Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK
National Institutes of Health
Building 45, Room 6AS13,
45 Center Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892
Phone: (301) 594-7717
Fax: (301) 480-3510
E-mail: jonesc@extra.niddk.nih.gov

***Demographics of Renal Disease in
Women***

Paul L. Kimmel, M.D.

Director, Diabetic Nephropathy Program
 Division of Kidney, Urologic, and
 Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK
 National Institutes of Health
 6707 Democracy Boulevard, Suite 607
 Bethesda, MD 20892-5458
 Phone: (301) 594-7717
 Fax: (301) 480-3510
 E-mail: kimmelp@extra.niddk.nih.gov

***Psychosocial Issues in Women with
 ESRD, Chair, Gender Based
 Differences in Access to Care and
 Choices for Care, and Outcomes,
 and Cochair, Epidemiology/
 Management/Complications in ESRD***

Robert G. Lahita, M.D., Ph.D.

Professor of Medicine
 Chief of Rheumatology
 Saint Vincent's Hospital
 The New York Medical College
 153 West 11th Street
 New York, NY 10011
 Phone: (212) 604-2950
 Fax: (212) 593-2303
 E-mail: rlahita@pol.net

***The Role of Sex Steroids in
 Autoimmunity***

Sandra P. Levison, M.D.

Chief, Division of Nephrology
 MCP-Hahnemann School of Medicine
 3300 Henry Avenue
 Philadelphia, PA 19129
 Phone: (215) 842-6988
 Fax: (215) 842-9439
 E-mail: sandra.levison@drexel.edu

***Chair, Special Problems in Women
 With Renal Insufficiency and ESRD
 and Cochair, Clinical Research Needs
 for Women with Renal Disease (Other
 Than ESRD)***

Julia Breyer Lewis, M.D.

Associate Professor of Medicine
 Division of Nephrology
 Vanderbilt University
 S-3223 Medical Center North
 Nashville, TN 37232
 Phone: (615) 343-6105
 Fax: (615) 343-7156
 E-mail: julia.lewis@mcmail.
 vanderbilt.edu

***Lessons From the MDRD/Captopril
 Trials***

Donald P. McDonnell, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
 Pharmacology and Cancer Biology
 Duke University Medical Center
 Box 3813, C259 LSRC Building
 Research Drive
 Durham, NC 27710
 Phone: (919) 684-6035
 Fax: (919) 681-7139
 E-mail: mcdon016@acpub.duke.edu

***Progesterone Physiology: Molecular
 Interactions***

Michael T. McMaster, Ph.D.

Assistant Adjunct Professor
 University of California, San Francisco
 513 Parnassus Avenue, HSW 604
 San Francisco, CA 94143-0512
 Phone: (415) 514-0172
 Fax: (415) 502-7338
 E-mail: mcmaster@cgl.ucsf.edu

***Preeclampsia: New Insights into
 Pathogenesis and the Role of the
 Trophoblast, Chair, Estrogens: What
 Makes Women Female? and Cochair,
 Role of Estrogens in Progression and
 Impact on the Vessel Wall***

Michael E. Mendelsohn, M.D., FACC

Professor of Medicine and Physiology
 Tufts University School of Medicine
 Director, Molecular Cardiology Research
 Institute
 New England Medical Center Hospitals,
 Inc.

750 Washington Street, Box 80

Boston, MA 02111

Phone: (617) 636-9370

Fax: (617) 636-1444

E-mail: michael.mendelsohn@
 esnmc.org

Estrogen and the Vessel Wall**Sharon M. Moe, M.D.**

Assistant Professor
 Indiana University
 Wishard Memorial Hospital
 1001 West 10th Street, OPW526
 Indianapolis, IN 46202

Phone: (317) 278-2868

Fax: (317) 278-2860

E-mail: smoe@iupui.edu

Bone Disease**Susan E. Mulroney, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor of Physiology and
 Biophysics
 Georgetown University School of
 Medicine

Basic Science Building, Room 256B

3900 Reservoir Road, NW

Washington, DC 20007

Phone: (202) 687-1017

Fax: (202) 687-7407

E-mail: mulrones@gusun.
 georgetown.edu

***The Effects of Sex and Age on the
 Rates of Progression of Renal Disease
 and Cochair, Basic Biology of
 Estrogens in Renal Disease, Disease
 Risk, and Autoimmunity***

Frederick Naftolin, M.D., Ph.D.

Professor/Chairman
 Department of Obstetrics and
 Gynecology
 Yale University School of Medicine
 333 Cedar Street, 335 FMB
 P.O. Box 208063
 New Haven, CT 06520-8063
 Phone: (203) 785-4003
 Fax: (203) 785-5294
 E-mail: frederick.naftolin@yale.edu

***A Woman's Life Cycle: Estrogen
 Physiology, the Menstrual Cycle,
 Menopause***

**Peter W. Nathanielsz, M.D., Ph.D.,
 ScD., F.R.C.O.G.**

Director, Laboratory for Pregnancy and
 Newborn Research

Department of Biomedical Sciences
 College of Veterinary Medicine

Cornell University, Box 16

Ithaca, NY 14853-6401

Phone: (607) 253-3086

Fax: (607) 253-3455

E-mail: pwn1@cornell.edu

***Intrauterine Growth Retardation and
 Risk for Future Renal Disease***

Joel Neugarten, M.D.

Site Director, Renal Division

Montefiore Medical Center

111 East 210th Street

Bronx, NY 10467

Phone: (718) 920-4991

Fax: (718) 920-6658

***Sex Differences in Nitric Oxide
 Response and Its Role in Progression***

Vivian W. Pinn, M.D.

Director
Office of Research on Women's
Health
National Institutes of Health
Building 1, Room 201
One Center Drive, MSC 0161
Bethesda, MD 20892-0161
Phone: (301) 402-1770
Fax: (301) 402-1798
E-mail: pinnv@od.nih.gov

Welcome**Frank M. Sacks, M.D.**

Associate Professor of Medicine
Department of Nutrition
Harvard Medical School
Harvard University
665 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115
Phone: (617) 432-1420
Fax: (617) 432-3101
E-mail: fsacks@hsph.harvard.edu

The Role of Estrogen Deficiency and Accelerated Vascular Disease in Patients With Renal Disease**Kathryn Sandberg, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor
Georgetown University Medical Center
Building D, Room 394
4000 Reservoir Road, NW
Washington, DC 20007
Phone: (202) 687-4179
Fax: (202) 687-7278
E-mail: sandberg@gusun.
georgetown.edu

Estrogen Regulation and Binding Proteins and Their Effects on the AT-1 Receptor**H. William Schnaper, M.D.**

Associate Professor of Pediatrics
Northwestern University Medical School
Pediatrics W-140
303 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611-3008
Phone: (312) 503-1180
Fax: (312) 503-1181
E-mail: schnaper@nwu.edu

Estrogen Effects on Endothelium and Chair, Estrogen and the Vessel Wall**Ashwini Sehgal, M.D.**

Assistant Professor of Medicine,
Biomedical Ethics, and Epidemiology and
Biostatistics
Case Western Reserve University
2500 Metrohealth Boulevard
Cleveland, OH 44109
Phone: (216) 778-7728
Fax: (216) 778-3945
E-mail: axs81@pop.cwru.edu

Women's Access to Transplantation**David Shapiro, Ph.D.**

Professor, Department of Biochemistry
University of Illinois
600 South Mathews Avenue, 413 RAL
Urbana, IL 61801
Phone: (217) 333-1788
Fax: (217) 244-5858
E-mail: djshapir@uiuc.edu

Estrogen Receptor-Regulated Transcription

Sharon Silbiger, M.D.

Associate Professor of Medicine
Department of Medicine
Montefiore Medical Center
Albert Einstein College of Medicine
111 East 210th Street, Centennial 3
Bronx, NY 10467
Phone: (718) 920-6097
Fax: (718) 515-6103
E-mail: silbiger@aecom.yu.edu

***The Role of Sex Steroids in
Extracellular Matrix Production by
Mesangial Cells*****Catherine O. Stehman-Breen, M.D.**

Assistant Professor of Medicine
University of Washington School of
Medicine
VA Puget Sound Health Care System
1660 South Columbian Way
Mailstop 111A
Seattle, WA 98108
Phone: (206) 764-2002
Fax: (206) 764-2153
E-mail: cos@u.washington.edu

***Renal Disease is an Estrogen
Deficiency State: Replacement
Therapy: Who's Taking It and Why?
and Cochair, Epidemiology/
Management/Complications in ESRD***

PARTICIPANTS

WOMEN AND RENAL DISEASE

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Sponsors

Women in Nephrology

National Institutes of Health

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

Office of Research on Women's Health

Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

Ahmed Adam, M.D., Ph.D.

VA Medical Center
One Veterans Drive
Minneapolis, MN 55417
Phone: (612) 725-2098

Ayub Akbari, M.D.

University of Ottawa
376 Pickford Drive
Kawata, Ontario
Canada K2L 3P1
Phone: (613) 761-4391
E-mail: ayubakbari@hotmail.com

Shelley Albert, M.D.

Assistant Professor
University of Toronto
184 Browning Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M4K-1W5
Phone: (613) 271-7452
E-mail: shelley.albert@utoronto.ca

Rebecca Backenroth-Maayan, M.D., M.P.H.

Hadassah University Hospital
112 N of Harim, Box #2806
Mevaseret Zion
Israel 90805
Phone: 972-2-533-7208
E-mail: shlomo_m@netvision.net.il

Susan Bagby, M.D.

Associate Professor of Medicine
Oregon Health Sciences University
3738 Southwest Council Crest Drive
Portland, OR 97201-1522
Phone: (503) 220-8262 ext. 55625
E-mail: bagbys@ohsu.edu

Steven Bander, M.D.

Gambro Healthcare
317 DeBalivere
St. Louis, MO 63112
Phone: (314) 367-9111
E-mail: steven.bander@corp.ghps.com

Vinod Bansal, M.D.

Professor of Medicine
Loyola University Medical Center
2160 South First Avenue
Maywood, IL 60153
Phone: (708) 216-3306
E-mail: vbansal@luc.edu

Tomas Berl, M.D.

Member, The American Society of
Nephrology
1200 19th Street, NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 857-1190

Judith Beto, Ph.D., R.D.

Professor
Dominican University
7900 West Division Street
River Forest, IL 60305
Phone: (708) 524-6906
E-mail: jbetob@luc.edu

Frankie M. Billingslea, M.D.

715 Jefferson Street, NE
Washington, DC 20011
Phone: (202) 526-5571

Susan Boch, M.S.N.

Adult Nurse Practitioner
172 Thomas Johnson Drive
Frederick, MD 21702
Phone: (301) 694-7788
E-mail: momandcrnp@aol.com

Juan P. Bosch, M.D.

Professor of Medicine
George Washington University
Medical Center
2150 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20037
Phone: (202) 994-4244
Fax: (202) 994-2972

Gretchen Brandt, M.D.

Director, Ambulatory Nephrology
Washington Hospital Center
110 Irving Street, NW, #2A70
Washington, DC 20010
Phone: (202) 877-6034
E-mail: glb2@mhg.edu

Cheryl Brown, M.D.

Nephrology Fellow
Department of Nephrology
Ochsner Foundation Hospital
1514 Jefferson Highway
New Orleans, LA 70121
Phone: (504) 842-6578

Jorge Cannata, M.D.

Head, Bone, and Mineral Unit
Hospital Central de Asturias
Julian Claveria S/N
Oviedo
Spain 33006
Phone: 34-985-106137
E-mail: cannata@hca.es

Doug Carey, Pharm., M.B.A.

President, Carey Medical Corporation
7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 700
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: (301) 913-9820
E-mail: dcarey@bellatlantic.net

Barbara Casazza, R.N.-C., M.S., F.N.P.

Family Nurse Practitioner
Rogosin Institute, Queens
66-20 Queens Boulevard
Woodside, NY 11377
Phone: (718) 457-3000

Daniel Catron, M.D.

Toronto General Hospital
200 Elizabeth Street, 11EN-221
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5G 2C4
Phone: (416) 340-4966
E-mail: judith.miller@utoronto.ca

Shirley Chang, M.D.

Nephrology Fellow
Pediatrics and Internal Medicine
University of Minnesota
420 Delaware Street, SE., Box #736
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Phone: (612) 626-2922
E-mail: chan0199@tc.umn.edu

Ashwini Raju Chavan, M.D.

Fellow, Division of Nephropathology
Armed Forces Institute of Pathology
14th Street & Alaska Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20306-6000
Phone: (202) 782-2785
E-mail: chavana@afip.osd.mil

Diane Cibrik, M.D.

Lecturer of Internal Medicine
University of Michigan Medical Center
1150 West Medical Center Drive
1560 MSRBII
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
Phone: (734) 763-0992
E-mail: dcibrik@umich.edu

Maria Coco, M.D.

Montefiore Medical Center
111 East 210 Street
Bronx, NY 10467
Phone: (718) 920-4136

Dalila B. Corry, M.D.

Associate Professor of Medicine
University of California, Los Angeles
School of Medicine
Olive View Medical Center
14445 Olive View Drive
Sylmar, CA 91342
Phone: (818) 364-3205
E-mail: dbcorry@ucla.edu

Amery J. Creighton, M.D.

Nephrology Fellow
Department of Nephrology
Ochsner Foundation Hospital
1514 Jefferson Highway
New Orleans, LA 70121
Phone: (504) 842-6578

Nancy Boucot Cummings, M.D.

Senior Biomedical Advisor, NIDDK
National Institutes of Health
6705 Rockledge Dr., Suite 8048
Bethesda, MD 20817-7973
Phone: (301) 594-7729
E-mail: nc15y@nih.gov

Veronica Delaney, M.D., Ph.D.

Renal Center
New York Medical College
West Chester Medical Center
Valhalla, NY 10595
Phone: (914) 493-7701
E-mail: veramd@aol.com

Anjani Dubey, M.D.

Nephrology Associates of Westchester
19 Bradhurst Avenue
Hawthorne, NY 10532
Phone: (914) 493-7701
E-mail: anjani_dubey@nymc.edu

Thomas DuBos, M.D.

The American Society of Nephrology
1200 19th Street, NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 857-1190

John Duncan, M.D.

Toronto General Hospital
1101-211 St. Patrick Street
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5T2Y9
Phone: (416) 598-4000
E-mail: jsd@myna.com

Richard A. Farishian, Ph.D.

Deputy Director, Office of Scientific
Program and Policy Analysis, NIDDK
National Institutes of Health
Building 31, Room 9A07
Bethesda, MD 20892
Phone: (301) 496-6623
E-mail: farishianr@extra.niddk.nih.gov

Loretta Finnegan, M.D.

Medical Advisor, Office of Research
on Women's Health
National Institutes of Health
One Center Drive, Room 201
Bethesda, MD 20892

Marie Foegh, M.D.

Director, Women's Health
Solvay Pharmaceuticals
5 West Wesley Ridge
Atlanta, GA 30327
Phone: (404) 603-8760
(770) 578-5709
E-mail: mfoegh@aol.com

Diane Frankenfield, Dr. PH
Epidemiologist/Technical Advisor
Office of Clinical Standards and Quality
Health Care Financing Administration
Mail Stop S3-02-01
7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244
Phone: (410) 786-7293
E-mail: dfrankenfield@hcfa.gov

Pamela Frederick, M.S.B.
Technical Advisor
Office of Clinical Standards and Quality
Health Care Financing Administration
Mail Stop S3-02-01
7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244
Phone: (410) 786-5785
E-mail: pfrederick@hcfa.gov

Susan L. Furth, M.D.
Assistant Professor, Pediatrics
Johns Hopkins University School of
Medicine
600 North Wolfe Street, Park 327
Baltimore, MD 21287-2535
Phone: (410) 955-2467
E-mail: sfurth@jhmi.edu

Eileen Gallery, M.D., F.R.A.C.P.
Professor
Department of Physiology
West Virginia University
Morgantown, WV 26506
Phone: (304) 293-1499
E-mail: egallery@hsc.edu

Kim Kunilla Gray
Secretary, Office of Research on Women's
Health
National Institutes of Health
Building 1, Room 201
One Center Drive, MSC 0161
Bethesda, MD 20892-0161
Phone: (301) 496-0706
Fax: (301) 402-1770

Barbara Greco, M.D., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Medicine
Department of Nephrology
St. Thomas Nephrology Group
St. Thomas Medical Plaza West
Vanderbilt University Medical Center
423 O'Harding Road, Suite 203
Nashville, TN 37205
Phone: (615) 222-6350

Joel Greer, Ph.D.
Health Care Financing Administration
7500 Security Boulevard, C3-19-07
Baltimore, MD 21244-1850
Phone: (410) 786-6695
E-mail: jgreer3@hcfa.gov

Eva Maria Grischke, M.D.
Department of Medicine, Obstetrics,
and Gynecology
University of Heidelberg
Heidelberg 69115
F.R. Germany
Phone: 0049-6222-59495
E-mail: vedat_schwenger@
med.uni.heidelberg.de

Donna S. Hanes, M.D.
Assistant Professor
Division of Nephrology
University of Maryland
22 South Greene Street, Room N3W143
Baltimore, MD 21201
Phone: (410) 328-5720
E-mail: dhanes@umppal.ab.umd.edu

David Heaney, M.D.
David Heaney MD, Inc.
1031 North Demaree
Visalia, CA 93291
Phone: (559) 733-9707
E-mail: heaney911@aol.com

Lee A. Hebert, M.D.

Director, Division of Nephrology
Ohio State University Medical Center
1654 Upham Drive, Room N210
Columbus, OH 43210
Phone: (614) 293-4997
E-mail: hebert.1@osu.edu

Shirley Hilden, Ph.D.

Center for Scientific Review
National Institutes of Health
Rockledge 2, Room 4218
6701 Rockledge Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892
Phone: (301) 435-1198
E-mail: HildenS@csr.nih.gov

Gladys H. Hirschman, M.D.

Director, Chronic Renal Diseases and
Pediatric Nephrology Programs
Division of Kidney, Urologic, and
Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK
National Institutes of Health
6707 Democracy Boulevard, Suite 609
Bethesda, MD 20892
Phone: (301) 594-7717
E-mail: Gladys_Hirschman@nih.gov

Jean Holley, M.D.

University of Rochester Medical Center
601 Elmwood Avenue, Box 675
Rochester, NY 14642
Phone: (716) 275-4517
E-mail: jean_holley@urmc.rochester.edu

Suzanne Humphries, M.D.

Assistant Professor of Medicine
Nephrology Division
UMDNJ, Cooper Hospital
401 Haddan Avenue, Room 282
Camden, NJ 08013
Phone: (609) 757-7844
E-mail: humphries-s@cooperhealth.edu

Carrie P. Hunter

Office of Research on Women's Health
National Institutes of Health
Building 31, Room B1C08
31 Center Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892

Kanae Ishihara, M.D.

Clinical Faculty
Section of Nephrology
Tulane University School of Medicine
1430 Tulane Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70112
Phone: (504) 588-5346
E-mail: kishiha@mailhost.tcs.tulane.edu

Edgar Jaimes, M.D.

VA Medical Center
One Veterans Drive
Minneapolis, MN 55417
Phone: (612) 725-2098

Margaret Jensvold, M.D.

Director, Center for Life Strategies
4312 Montgomery Avenue
Bethesda, MD 20814-4402
Phone: (301) 657-2929

Brian Johnston, B.A.

VA Medical Center
One Veterans Drive
Minneapolis, MN 55417
Phone: (612) 725-2098
Fax: (612) 727-5640
E-mail: johnston.brian@
minneapolis.va.gov

Michelle Josephson, M.D.

University of Chicago
5841 South Maryland Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637
Phone: (773) 702-1703
Fax: (773) 702-5818
E-mail: mjosephs@medicine.bsd.
uchicago.edu

Amrit K. Kang, M.D.

Resident, Toronto General Hospital
University of Toronto
200 Elizabeth Street, 11 EN-221
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5G 2C4
Phone: (416) 340-4966
E-mail: amritkang@hotmail.com

Lois Anne Katz, M.D.

VA New York Harbor Health Care System
423 East 23rd Street
New York, NY 10010
Phone: (212) 686-7500 ext. 7134
E-mail: lois.katz@med.va.gov

Anna Maria Kausz, M.D.

New England Medical Center
750 Washington Street, Box 391
Boston, MA 02111
Phone: (617) 636-9424
E-mail: annamaria.kausz@es.nemc.org

Charles Kim, M.D.

187 Thomas Johnson Drive
Frederick, MD 21702
Phone: (301) 695-6655

Myra Kleinpeter, M.D.

Director, Peritoneal Dialysis Program
Tulane University School of Medicine
1430 Tulane Avenue, SL-45
New Orleans, LA 70112
Phone: (504) 588-5346

Richard J. Krieg, Jr., Ph.D.

Professor of Anatomy and Pediatrics
Virginia Commonwealth University
Medical College of Virginia
12th & Marshall
P.O. Box 980709
Richmond, VA 23298
Phone: (804) 828-9540
E-mail: krieg@hsc.vcu.edu

John W. Kusek, Ph.D.

Director, Clinical Trials Program
Division of Kidney, Urologic, and
Hematologic Diseases, NIDDK
National Institutes of Health
6707 Democracy Boulevard, Suite 617
45 Center Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892
Phone: (301) 594-7735
E-mail: KusekJ@extra.niddk.nih.gov

Vesta Lai, R.N.

Toronto General Hospital
200 Elizabeth Street
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5G 2C4
Phone: (416) 340-4966
E-mail: judith.miller@utoronto.ca

Pascale H. Lane, M.D.

Associate Professor of Pediatrics
University of Nebraska
982169 Nebraska Medical Center
Omaha, NE 68198
Phone: (402) 559-7344
E-mail: phlane@unmc.edu

Julie Levison, M.Phil.

Candidate
Oxford University
Wadman College
Oxford, OX1 3PN England
708 Mount Pleasant Road
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
Phone: (610) 527-1292
E-mail: Julie.Levison@wadham.ox.ac.uk

Susie Lew, M.D.

Professor
George Washington University
2150 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, 4-425
Washington, DC 20037
Phone: (202) 994-4244

Ronald Malseptic, M.D.

Nephrologist
CVPH Medical Center
210 Cornelia Street #305
Plattsburgh, NY 12901
Phone: (518) 562-7484
E-mail: renal1@northnet.org

Ronald Margolis, Ph.D.

Senior Advisor, Molecular Endocrinology
National Institute of Diabetes and
Digestive and Kidney Diseases
National Institutes of Health
Building 45, SAN12J
Bethesda, MD 20892
Phone: (301) 594-8819
Fax: (301) 435-6047
E-mail: rm76f@nih.gov

Mariana Markell, M.D.

Associate Professor of Medicine
State University of New York
Health Science Center
450 Clarkson Avenue, Box 52
Brooklyn, NY 11203
Phone: (718) 270-1584
E-mail: mmarkell@netmail.hscbklyn.edu

Holly J. Mattix, M.D.

Research Fellow
Massachusetts General Hospital
63 Colborne Road #6
Brighton, MA 02135
Phone: (617) 789-3658
E-mail: hmattix@email.msn.com

Omaira Meléndez, Pharm. D.

Renal Pharmacology Fellow
Department of Pharmacy
Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital
One Robert Wood Johnson Place
New Brunswick, NJ 08903
Phone: (732) 937-8582
E-mail: omelende@rci.rutgers.edu

Beckie Michael, D.O.

Medical Director, Intermediate
Dialysis Unit
Thomas Jefferson University Hospital
834 Walnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107-5104
Phone: (215) 955-8522
E-mail: Beckie.Michael@mail.tju.edu

Ilene J. Miller, M.D.

North Shore University Hospital
100 Community Drive
Great Neck, NY 11021
Phone: (516) 465-8200
Fax: (516) 465-8202

Judith A. Miller, M.D., F.R.C.P. (c), M.Sc.

Staff Nephrologist
University of Toronto
Toronto General Hospital
200 Elizabeth Street
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5G 2C4
Phone: (416) 340-4966
E-mail: judith.miller@utoronto.ca

Rob Morrison

Government Relations
The American Society of Nephrology
2025 M Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 857-1190

Barbara Murphy, M.D.

Director, Transplant Nephrology
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
1 Gustave L. Levy Place, Box 1243
New York, NY 10029
Phone: (212) 241-5850
E-mail: barbara.murphy@mssm.edu

Leslie Neve, R.N., M.B.A.

Transplant Coordinator
University Hospital, Brooklyn
450 Clarkson Avenue, Box 40
Brooklyn, NY 11203
Phone: (718) 270-1898

Camilla Birch Nielsen, Ph.D.

The Faculty of Health
University of Aarhus
Falstersgade 3,2.tv
8000 Aarhus C
Denmark
Phone: 45-86135583

Nana Nikoi, M.D.

Nephrologist
8181 Professional Place, Suite 200
Landover, MD 20785
Phone: (301) 918-7279
E-mail: nanatiaa@aol.com

Donna O'Shea, M.D.

Bay Street Medical Center
759 Chestnut Street
Springfield, MA 01199
Phone: (413) 794-5608
E-mail: oshead@bhs.org

Michael O'Shea, M.D.

Western New England Renal
and Transplant Association
207 Ashley Avenue
West Springfield, MA 01199
Phone: (413) 750-3440
E-mail: mhoshea@aol.com

Rulan Park, M.D.

Johns Hopkins University School
of Medicine
600 North Wolfe Street
Park Building 327
Baltimore, MD 21287-2125
Phone: (410) 955-2467
E-mail: rulan@umich.edu

Antoinette Pechère-Bertschi, M.D.

Hospital University Policlinique Medicine
University of Geneva
R11 Geneva-14
Switzerland
Phone: 41-22-372-95-98
E-mail: pechere.antoINETTE@hcuge.ch

Tiina Podvmow, M.D.C.M.

Nephrology Fellow
University of Ottawa
239 Powell Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada K1S 2A4
Phone: (613) 236-4202

Kusuma C. Rao, M.D.

9407 Spruce Tree Circle
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: (301) 571-5355
Fax: (301) 571-5355
E-mail: kusumachavali@netscape.net

Jill Rathbun

Director, Government Relations
The American Society of Nephrology
2025 M Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 857-1190

Mary Beth Ribar, R.N., M.S.

Consultant
Office of Clinical Standards and Quality
Health Care Financing Administration
7500 Security Boulevard
Mail Stop S3-02-01
Baltimore, MD 21244-1850
Phone: (410) 786-1121
E-mail: mribar@hcfa.gov

Janet Mary Roscoe, M.D., c.m.

Building C, Suite C-11
3000 Lawrence Avenue East
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M1P 2V1
Phone: (416) 438-9000
E-mail: janet.roscoe@home.com

Raquel M. Rosen, M.D.

Nephrologist
Bassett Healthcare
1 Atwell Road
Cooperstown, NY 13326
Phone: (607) 547-3282

Sharda Sabnis, M.D.

Chief, Division of Nephropathology
Armed Forces Institute of Pathology
14th Street & Alaska Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20306
Phone: (202) 782-1711
E-mail: sabnis@afip.osd.mil

Rebecca J. Schmidt, D.O.

Associate Professor of Medicine
Box 9165, Nephrology
West Virginia University School
of Medicine
Morgantown, WV 26506
Phone: (304) 293-2551
E-mail: rschmid@wvu.edu

John Selden, III, M.D.

Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology
DC General Hospital
303 Beech Street
Fort Washington, MD 20744
Phone: (301) 292-8324

Marcia Silver, M.D.

MetroHealth Medical Center
2500 MetroHealth Drive
Cleveland, OH 44109-1998
Phone: (216) 778-4159
E-mail: msilver@metrohealth.org

Jane Spencer

Office of Scientific Program and
Policy Analysis, NIDDK
National Institutes of Health
Building 31, Room 9A07
Bethesda, MD 20892
Phone: (301) 496-6623
E-mail: spencerj@hq.niddk.nih.gov

Shobha Sriharan, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Virginia State University
Box 9416
Petersburg, VA 23806
Phone: (804) 524-6768
Fax: (804) 524-5666
E-mail: sriharan@vsu.edu

Frazier Stevenson, M.D.

Assistant Professor of Medicine
University of California School
of Medicine
TB 136
Davis, CA 95616
Phone: (530) 752-4010
E-mail: ftstevenson@ucdavis.edu

Karen Studwell

The American Society of Nephrology
2025 M Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 857-1190
Fax: (202) 857-5140

Candace Thurston, M.D.

1320 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone: (703) 739-8888

Jason Umans, M.D., Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Medicine
Georgetown University
7521 Pepperell Drive
Bethesda, MD 20817
Phone: (202) 784-3006
E-mail: j_umans@hotmail.com

Judith H. Veis, M.D.

Associate Director
Washington Hospital Center
110 Irving Street, NW, #2A70
Washington, DC 20010
Phone: (202) 877-6034
E-mail: jhv1@mhg.edu

Jill W. Verlander, D.V.M.

Health Science Center
University of Florida College of Medicine
P.O. Box 100215
Gainesville, FL 32610-0215
Phone: (352) 846-0820
E-mail: verlaj@medicine.ufl.edu

Brian A.J. Walters, Ph.D.
Scientific Affairs and Clinical Research
Gambro Healthcare
5361 Northwest 33rd Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33319
Phone: (954) 777-1123
E-mail: brianwalters@lab.ghps.com

Threvia West, M.D.
DC General Hospital
1139 Allison Street, NW
Washington, DC 20011
Phone: (202) 291-9382

Tip Woodward, M.D.
5530 Wisconsin Avenue, #550
Chevy Chase, MD 20815
Phone: (301) 656-3316

Yehezewd Woredekal, M.D.
Assistant Professor
Health Science Center
State University of New York
450 Clarkson Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11205
Phone: (718) 270-1584
E-mail: yworedekal@aol.com

Jane Yu, Ph.D.
Postdoctoral Associate
Department of Medical Oncology
Fox Chase Cancer Center
7701 Burholme Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19111
Phone: (215) 728-2955
E-mail: jj_yu@fccc.edu

Martin Zeier, M.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Medicine and Nephrology
University of Heidelberg
Heidelberg 69115
F.R. Germany
Phone: 0049-6222-59495
E-mail: vedat_schwenger@
med.uni-heidelberg.de