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Arizona MH Research Group Seeds Growth of Local Science

Aaron Levin

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If great oaks from little acorns grow, then it helps to get those acorns in the ground as early as possible. That's the strategy behind Arizona's Institute for Mental Health Research (IMHR).

Founded in 2002, the Phoenix-based institute supports mental health research in Arizona while encouraging scientists to remain in the state. It has managed to do that, despite some recession-induced ups and downs in finding matching funds from private donors.

"Our goal was to fund new, creative research projects that have the potential to garner larger grants down the line," said Gary Grove, M.D., the institute's vice president and a staff psychiatrist at the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Ariz.

The institute is a funding umbrella, not a building with labs, so its grantees inevitably work at or collaborate with other institutions in the state, including the University of Arizona, Arizona State University, the Mayo Clinic, the Barrow Neurological Institute, and the Translational Genomics Research Institute.

The grants can help jump-start research careers, said Grove.



**An early grant from Arizona's Institute for Mental Health Research helped jumpstart the career of Cynthia Stonnington, M.D., an associate professor of**

Cynthia Stonnington, M.D., an associate professor of psychiatry at Mayo, has received two IMHR grants. With the first, she studied how APOe status influences the effects of lorazepam in healthy subjects. The second, in collaboration with Richard Lane, M.D., Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry, psychology, and neuroscience at the University of Arizona, examined somatization.

"My first grant was important for the experience it provided and was later helpful in getting funding for other studies," said Stonnington in an interview with *Psychiatric News*. "An IMHR grant can allow us to get pilot data to make the case for larger studies."

Ole Thienhaus, M.D., chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Arizona in Tucson, agreed. Several of his faculty members have received grants from IMHR.

"The institute is not underwriting a center or project grants," said Thienhaus in an interview. "Fifty thousand dollars a year with no indirect costs may seem like small potatoes, but it can get young researchers in position for serious

psychiatry at the Mayo Clinic in funding from the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Scottsdale. Health.”

The grants may also allow researchers who are more advanced in their careers to try out new ideas deemed too risky for conventional funding, she pointed out.

“This is a great idea,” said former APA President Carolyn Robinowitz, M.D., a member of IMHR’s 2013 External Advisory Committee. “These low-key opportunities stimulate and encourage beginning researchers to engage in projects and promote an atmosphere of inquiry.”

IMHR’s foundation was laid in 2001 when the Arizona legislature allocated \$5 million, a sum that was to be matched by private fundraising.

“We raised around \$1.9 million in private funds in the first year, and then the state hit a financial crisis and the rest of the funds went away,” said Mike Meyer, M.B.A., a health care recruiting executive who is chair and president of the IMHR board. “Over the years we have probably raised another million.”

About \$1.5 million of the total has been distributed as research grants to scientists, said Meyer in an interview. The rest went to recruiting major scientists and retaining them in Arizona (in partnership with academic institutions) or went for educational programs and a small staff.

The recession hit the institute hard. Donations dropped off, and two of the three staff members had to be let go. Private donations and grants have picked up in recent years, however, although the state has not offered new funding. As a result, the institute made just three grants of \$20,000 each in 2013. Grove and Meyer hope a recovering economy will reverse that trend.

“Different areas have different ideas about philanthropy,” said Alan Gelenberg, M.D., formerly the chair of psychiatry at the University of Arizona. Gelenberg helped IMHR get started and is now the Shively/Tan Professor and Chair of Psychiatry at the Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey.

“In big cities, there are people who can give \$10 million or \$100 million, but in Arizona, they’ve struggled to get money,” said Gelenberg. “Even small grants can help over a short time, though,” he said. “With modest funding, it’s better to make targeted grants. That way, 100 percent of the dollars go for what you want.”

There is no formal expectation that every small grant will lead to bigger things, but sometimes the seed money does take root and grow. Stonnington’s initial \$25,000 lorazepam study grant ultimately led to more than \$300,000 in funding from other sources. Amelia Gallitano, M.D., Ph.D., an associate professor of basic medical sciences at the University of Arizona, and colleagues began with a similar IMHR grant and later received \$1.9 million from other sources for work on the genetics of schizophrenia.

Despite its bumpy first decade, IMHR may yet serve as a model. At the moment, it appears to be the only state-focused nonprofit grant-making organization of its kind, said Thienhaus. “But I wish there were more like it.” ■

Information about the Institute for Mental Health Research is posted at <http://www.imhr.org>.  
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