

Seattle Institute for Biomedical and Clinical Research

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Feature



George Merriam, MD

George R. Merriam, MD, is Director of the Clinical Study Unit (CSU) at the American Lake Division of VA Puget Sound, and a physician in the Division of Metabolism, Endocrinology, and Nutrition. At the University of Washington (UW), he is a Professor of Medicine and Adjunct Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and directs the neuroendocrine-pituitary center.

His research interests center in endocrine aging and neuroendocrine-pituitary regulation, the way in which hormones and the nervous system interact. Growth hormone (GH), the most abundant pituitary hormone, is a major focus. While interest in GH has historically focused on children, GH continues to have important metabolic effects on body composition, strength, and exercise capacity in adults. Studies in the CSU examine the signs and symptoms of GH deficiency (GHD) and the effects and side effects of GH replacement. It was early recognized that GH is dependent on hypothalamic regulation by two peptides, GH-releasing hormone (GHRH) and the GH inhibitor somatostatin. More recently the gastric appetite-regulating peptide ghrelin and synthetic compounds that act at its receptors ("ghrelin mimetics") have been found also to have potent GH-stimulating effects, and to synergize with GHRH. A recent project examined the effects of a year

of treatment with an orally active ghrelin mimetic in pre-frail but otherwise healthy elders, showing improvement in some functional measures, the first time such a functional improvement has been demonstrated with these compounds (*Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, e-pub 27 January 2009, and recently featured on King5.com).

His other major research focus centers on the effects of menopausal hormone therapy on cardiovascular risk factors in women who are within 3 years of menopause. This multicenter blinded, placebo-controlled study, "KEEPS," follows up on findings of the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), which failed to show cardiovascular benefits in an older group of women more distant from menopause, but which suggested a trend toward beneficial effects among the one third of WHI subjects enrolled closest to menopause, suggesting that hormone therapy might not be able to reverse atherosclerosis once it develops but might slow its progress if begun soon enough. KEEPS will also be the first direct comparison of oral vs. transdermal hormone therapy in this context. This study has recently completed enrollment and will follow its subjects over 4 years of treatment. A sub-study funded by NIH also examines cognition and mood.

The main KEEPS study is funded through a grant from a private non-profit aging research institute to the University of Washington, with a subcontract to SIBCR. The KEEPS cognitive and affective study, and other studies are funded by the NIH National Institute on Aging and other foundation and industry grants, and administered by SIBCR.

Key staff at the Clinical Study Unit include UW Research Nurse Pamela Asberry, RN; and SIBCR employees Lynna Smith, ARNP; Monica Kletke, BS; and SueAnn Brickle.

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ▶ Please join us for the SIBCR employee appreciation on Friday, April 24th at 10:00 am in room BB108. Refreshments will be served!
- ▶ Mark your calendar for the upcoming Research Colloquia to be held March 18, 2009 in BB108 from 12 – 1 pm. The speaker is Dr. Hertzler Gerstein who will present "Glucose Control and Cardiovascular Disease".

Grant News

- ▶ NIH recently sent an announcement urging eligible PIs to establish Early Stage Investigator Status. For more details, please visit: http://era.nih.gov/news_and_events/early_stage_investigator_01-09-09.cfm.
- ▶ NIH and other DHHS sponsors have transitioned to ADOBE based forms and as a result there have been some system delays. To avoid late submissions, SIBCR requires final proposals be submitted to us by noon two days prior to the sponsor deadline.

Welcome!

SIBCR is pleased to welcome the following new employees: Leojean Anderson, Michelle Martinez, Julia McKay, and Brenda Montgomery