

News Release

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\$4.7 MILLION GRANT ESTABLISHES CENTER OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH ON PREGNANCY OUTCOMES

HERSHEY, PA— Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center was recently awarded a \$4.7 million grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Health's share of the national tobacco settlement to establish the Central PA Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes.

Under the direction of principal investigator, Carol S. Weisman, Ph.D., professor of health evaluation sciences and obstetrics and gynecology, Penn State College of Medicine, the center's primary goal will be to improve women's health status and health care prior to conception in high-risk, medically-underserved populations in central Pa., with a special focus on rural areas.

"Illness and death associated with preterm birth and low birthweight are important public health problems at both the national and state levels," said Weisman, who is also a professor of health policy and administration, Penn State University. "Those adverse pregnancy outcomes also represent some of the most serious and persistent examples of health disparities due to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography."

Recent studies have questioned the effectiveness of many public health programs that focus on health during pregnancy. Therefore, the Center of Excellence for Research on Pregnancy Outcomes will focus on optimizing women's health prior to conception.

First, the center of excellence team will assess the prevalence of a range of environmental, psychosocial and biological risk factors for adverse pregnancy outcomes, specifically preterm birth and low birthweight, in reproductive-age women in central Pa. Then they will identify the relationships among risk factors and race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, rurality, and women's health care access and use. Finally, they will develop and test a method to improve women's preconceptional health, health behaviors and health literacy by addressing risk factors and barriers to health care in specific underserved high-risk groups.

"We hypothesize that the prevalent risk factors for preterm birth and low birthweight in central Pa. will cluster around psychosocial factors such as stress, chronic conditions like

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hypertension, obesity and asthma, and infections such as bacterial vaginosis,” Weisman said. “We anticipate that these factors will vary widely across our population and therefore, interventions will have to be multidimensional to be effective.”

Although based at Penn State Hershey Medical Center, Weisman brought together representatives from Penn State University Park and Penn State Harrisburg, the Family Health Council of Central Pennsylvania, Franklin and Marshall College, and Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania. Co-principal investigators are John J. Botti, M.D., professor of obstetrics and gynecology, Penn State College of Medicine, and Marianne Hillemeier, Ph.D., assistant professor of health policy and administration and demography, Penn State University.

This award was part of a \$22.5 million disbursement of funds announced by Calvin Johnson, M.D., Pennsylvania health secretary, on behalf of Gov. Edward G. Rendell, March 11, 2004. The funds were awarded from Pennsylvania’s share of the national tobacco settlement. The grants established five Centers of Excellence to reduce disparities in lung disease and pregnancy outcomes. In addition to the Center of Excellence at Penn State Hershey Medical Center, centers were established at Drexel University, University of Pennsylvania, Temple University and The Wistar Institute. Johnson said the Department of Health will distribute another \$58.7 million in tobacco settlement funds through a formula later this year.

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