



COORDINATING CLINICAL RESEARCH EXQUISITELY

The ZSFG Department of Medicine, with \$145 million in FY22 awards, is a powerhouse of clinical research. Our extraordinary clinical research coordinators work behind the scenes to enroll patients, coordinate study visits, collect biosamples and qualitative data, and more. Like Swiss Army knives, clinical research coordinators possess a broad range of abilities, including organizational skills, attention to detail, facility with both words and numbers, and the ability to communicate clearly, ethically, and compassionately with patient populations that are underrepresented in research. This month we highlight a few of our outstanding clinical research coordinators.

Cutting Edge Treatment

Clinical Research Supervisor Paul Couey, CCRP, began his clinical research career at the AIDS Research Consortium of Atlanta in the mid-1990s, just as protease inhibitors became available. “Seeing research make a difference in people’s lives was really fulfilling,” he said.

Since 2008 he has worked in the ZSFG Division of



Paul Couey

Hematology-Oncology, and currently mentors three clinical research coordinators. His team recruits and screens patients with cancer, and forwards tissue samples, imaging studies, and treatment results to study sponsors. They enroll patients in long-term observational studies, obtain biobank specimens, and conduct qualitative research studies, using focus groups and interviews to learn about patients’ quality of life and functional status.

“We recognize that informed consent is an ongoing process, not just signing a form at the

beginning of a study,” said Mr. Couey. “It’s crucial that patients understand each step and get answers to their questions, and that we document everything in a coherent, understandable way.”

He credits Terence Friedlander, MD, Chief of the ZSFG

Division of Hematology-Oncology, with expanding clinical research efforts – making the latest cancer treatments available to more patients and diversifying clinical study enrollment. While patients can be referred to UCSF for clinical trials, running them at ZSFG helps patients access crucial support services like bilingual clinical research coordinators and patient navigators.

“For a lot of our patients, cancer is not their main problem,” said Mr. Couey. “We have the potential to not only describe but also address health disparities. That includes not just access to new therapies, but also changes in practice to improve the lives of vulnerable populations.”

Listening With Care

Clinical Research Coordinator Shreya Swaminathan works with Priscilla Hsue, MD, Chief of the ZSFG Division of Cardiology, and Felicia Chow, MD, MAS, Associate Professor in the Department of Neurology at ZSFG, on a study of how a cholesterol-lowering medication called alirocumab affects patients with HIV. “A lot of people living with HIV can be statin-intolerant, and we’re investigating whether this medication is a good alternative, or even a first course of action,” said



Ms. Swaminathan. “We’re also looking at whether it helps reduce brain inflammation.”

Ms. Swaminathan sees study participants at least monthly for a year. She explains potential risks and benefits of treatment, coordinates blood draws and imaging studies, arranges shipment of samples, and administers questionnaires.



Shreya Swaminathan

“The most rewarding aspect is hearing about participants’ lives,” she said. “I’ve heard impactful stories about what they went through in the late 80s before there were good medications, when so many people died. Right now, Alirocumab is pretty expensive and isn’t the first go-to that doctors would prescribe. I hope this study creates more data, and will ultimately benefit participants.”

She also works with Dr. Chow on a trial examining whether Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) helps people living with HIV lower their levels of inflammation in the brain. MBSR incorporates meditation to help people respond rather than react to stress. “Many participants have a lot

going on, whether it's unstable housing or financial issues," said Ms. Swaminathan, who hopes to attend medical school. "I hope this study provides them tools to better manage stress."

Building Trust

Clinical Research Coordinators Deanna Lee and Viet Nguyen plan to attend medical school, and are gaining invaluable experience working with Carolyn Hendrickson, MD, MPH, Medical Director of the ZSFG Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and Assistant Professor in the ZSFG Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, and Lucy Kornblith, MD, Assistant Professor of Surgery in the ZSFG Division of General Surgery. Ms. Lee and Mr. Nguyen focus their time on two COVID-19-related studies, as well as a stem cell infusion trial for patients with acute respiratory distress syndrome, a life-threatening lung injury. "I was considering medicine and wanted to get more exposure to hospitals and patients in a clinical setting," said Ms. Lee. "I worked in a similar setting in university, and it was a fantastic experience."



Deanna Lee

"I wanted to learn more about clinical research and how it can improve health outcomes and reduce health disparities for patients, especially those from marginalized, immigrant, Black, and Latino communities," said Mr. Nguyen.

Both are skilled at navigating delicate conversations with patients. "I reiterate that we're so sorry that they're sick, and try to humanize the process so they know we see them as human beings, not just potential participants," said Mr. Nguyen. "We emphasize that the research is voluntary, and recognize it may not be their priority. For many, this is the first time they've participated in research. It's heartwarming to hear patients talk about wanting to help the community. I hope they'll participate again in the future, and have increased trust in the health care system."

"A major part of communication is listening, and meeting people where they are," said Ms. Lee. "We try to make sure that we're connecting in a way that speaks to them, instead of at them."

She and Mr. Nguyen work with the nursing team to obtain blood and sputum samples from ICU patients, and to ensure patients are stable before receiving infusions. "We try to understand the ICU workflow, build relationships with the nurses, and try to not be a nuisance," said Mr. Nguyen. "We tactfully ask them if they can help with the study. The main thing is to be flexible, learning when to move forward and when to step back when there's a different priority for the patient."



Viet Nguyen

The clinicians they work with are true role models. "I really like working at this hospital, seeing how much the staff advocate for their patients," said Ms. Lee. "They're so committed to advancing science, but also keeping everything patient-centered. Their dedication to doing right by patients is really inspiring. When our doctors talk to patients and their families about research studies and treatment options, their sincerity and empathy are so obvious. It's what draws me to clinical medicine as a practice."

Mr. Nguyen agrees. "These people have some type of superpower, when I see how much care the whole team gives to each patient in the COVID ICU – and then they're able to lead research studies on top of that," he said. "They work so much, but are also so compassionate. Carolyn and Lucy embody dedication to science and clinical care, and it's really inspiring to work with them."

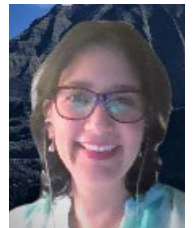
Improving Systems & Increasing Diversity

Senior Clinical Research Coordinator Alexandra Velasquez, MS, CCRP, works with Delphine Tuot, MD, Associate Professor in the ZSFG Division of Nephrology, and other faculty members on studies to improve care for patients with chronic kidney disease (CKD). "Collaboration is essential to everything I do, and I'm so lucky to work with an incredible team," she said.

She recently supervised a team supporting the Kidney Awareness Registry and Education (KARE) study, a randomized controlled trial investigating whether promoting exercise, healthy diet, medication education, and other

lifestyle changes could improve outcomes among vulnerable populations with CKD. "It's extremely rewarding when a patient calls even after they're done with the study to thank us because their blood pressure is controlled, or they're excited about exercising," said Ms. Velasquez.

She also collaborated with the Vice Dean's Office at ZSFG to streamline the research application process, enabling investigators to gather approval signatures via DocuSign rather than on a paper form. "Process improvement is something we naturally do as clinical research coordinators," said Ms. Velasquez. "We identify what's not working as well as the underlying issues, get data, figure out logistics, come up with alternatives, and try to implement those."



Alexandra Velasquez

Ms. Velasquez also works to increase diversity in the biomedical workforce through her leadership role in the Clinical Research Coordinators: Learners for Equity (CIRCLE) Training Program. Last summer, 17 scholars participated in an intensive two-week paid training program to learn about clinical research through didactics, guest speakers and project-based skill-building opportunities, then shadowed UCSF clinical research coordinators in the fall. "It's great to witness how CIRCLE creates a safe space for people to learn, which helps them become more confident and ultimately become agents of change," said Ms. Velasquez. "UCSF is my family. I love the opportunities I've had to contribute and make a difference."

Elizabeth Chur

Editors: Neil Powe, Laurae Pearson, Brooks Bigart

SPOTLIGHT

In this season of thanks, we are grateful for all of you and wish all a connected and restorative holiday.

Dean Schillinger, MD, Division of General Internal Medicine, received the WHO Noncommunicable Diseases Lab Award for "The Bigger Picture."

The Health At Home Mobile COVID-19 Vaccination Team, with **Anna Chodos, MD, MPH**, Division of General Internal Medicine, as a program developer, received a Health Commission 2021 Award from the SF Health Commission.

The Commonwealth Club recognized four ZSFG faculty as Distinguished Citizens 2021: **Alicia Fernandez, MD**, Division of General Internal Medicine; **Margot Kushel, MD**, Center for Vulnerable Populations; and **Monica Gandhi, MD, MPH**, **Diane Havlir, MD**, and **Carina Marquez, MD**, Division of HIV, Infectious Diseases, and Global Medicine.

