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WSU greets NICHD director, salutes PRB contract renewal with special events

November 15, 2013

Wayne State University held a series of events Nov. 15 in recognition of World Prematurity Day and the second 10-year contract awarded to WSU to continue hosting the Perinatology Research Branch of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

The day included a visit from NICHD Director Alan Guttmacher, M.D., who in the morning toured the PRB, then delivered a 1 p.m. Distinguished President's Lecture to a packed crowd before serving as a special guest at a 3 p.m. celebration in the School of Medicine's Margherio Family Conference Center.

Dr. Guttmacher oversees the NICHD's activities in pediatric health and development, maternal health, reproductive health, intellectual and developmental disabilities, rehabilitation medicine and other areas. He spoke to an audience of more than 250 WSU faculty, staff, students and guests from the Detroit Medical Center on the future of biomedical research, including a brief discussion of the Human Placenta Project, a 10-year project his institute will coordinate from 2015 to 2025. He concluded his speech on the state of genomics in patient care with a hypothetical story of a newborn delivered in Detroit whose health care throughout life, including interventions to stave off diseases, is guided by her genomic structure scanned at birth. The story is futuristic, but one that will likely occur in common patient care, perhaps even before 2025, he said.

The PRB has been hosted by the School of Medicine since 2002, and is located in the Detroit Medical Center's Hutzel Women's Hospital, a university health care partner. The \$165.9 million awarded to support the branch is WSU's largest research contract.

"A large part of our mission is paying attention to health disparities," Dr. Guttmacher said. "(Wayne State) came up with the best argument that the kinds of things we would need to move forward with the research could be done here."

The branch specializes in research to develop novel diagnostic, therapeutic and preventive strategies to reduce adverse pregnancy outcomes, infant mortality and disability, and provides research training for health care professionals working to improve the health of mothers and their children. Major discoveries include a novel drug treatment for cerebral palsy and the use of progesterone gel to decrease the rate of premature births by 45 percent.

"I was very impressed by the breadth of really first class research being done," Dr. Guttmacher said of the PRB following his visit. "There wasn't just one thing being done. There are so many things being done. The questions being asked are important ones that wouldn't seem very obvious. This group asks the important questions and has very good collaborations that are also unique."

Since coming to WSU 20 years ago, the PRB has assisted more than 20,000 at-risk mothers, most of them uninsured. The cumulative economic activity associated with the branch for the second 10-year contract is estimated to exceed \$347 million.

PRB Chief Roberto Romero, M.D., D.Med.Sci, hosted the tour of his facility, which provided Dr. Guttmacher with details about the scientific achievements of the branch, its commitment to the region, and the economic and medical benefits it brings to Detroit.



Alan Guttmacher, M.D., director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, lectures to faculty and guest at the WSU School of Medicine.



Dr. Guttmacher and WSU President M. Roy Wilson meet with patients and staff of the Perinatology Research Branch during a tour of the NICHD facility.

"He wanted to come see the work that is done here, to see firsthand our investigators, our patients and the reality of where we work," Dr. Romero said. "The research that is done here translates to touching people lives. (It) enriches what we're able to do that couldn't be done elsewhere."

WSU President M. Roy Wilson, M.D., joined Dr. Guttmacher on the tour, and also spoke at the public celebration, an event planned to recognize the hard work and dedication of the School of Medicine's faculty, the PRB team and WSU in securing the PRB contract renewal. The gathering showed appreciation for the various WSU, community and government officials who supported the effort.

"This has certainly been a long time coming, and a lot of people have put in a lot of hard work," he said.

The event also served as a platform to observe World Prematurity Day, established by the March of Dimes to call attention to the fact that preterm birth continues to be a devastating problem worldwide, including in Detroit, where one in five children is born premature.

School of Medicine Dean Valerie M. Parisi, M.D., M.P.H., M.B.A., was the celebration event's emcee.

"The work of the PRB is so very critical to the city and residents of Detroit. The physicians and researchers devote their efforts to making certain that every baby enters the world with a healthy start," Dean Parisi said. "This is especially important in our great city because we have a premature birth rate higher than the national average."

She thanked WSU and PRB faculty, staff and supporters, and introduced speakers that included President Wilson, Detroit Mayor-elect Mike Duggan and WSU Board of Governors Chair Debbie Dingell.

"The PRB is one of Michigan's gems and we're proud of it and we're going to keep it in Michigan. This is important not only to the women of Detroit, but to the women of the world," Dingell said.

Representatives of the Detroit Medical Center and of the Michigan Chapter of the March of Dimes also spoke. The March of Dimes presented four awards to leadership in attendance, in recognition of the role of WSU and the PRB in the fight against prematurity and infant mortality.

Dr. Guttmacher received the Prematurity Prevention Leadership Award for his contributions and commitment to the prevention of preterm birth, and specifically, the role of NICHD in the successful completion of the progesterone gel trial. Dr. Romero received the Prematurity Prevention Pioneer Award for his vision, creativity, scientific and medical contributions in the discovery of the mechanisms of the disease responsible for preterm birth and for the development of various strategies to reduce the burden of preterm birth on mothers, their children and families and society. Dean Parisi received the Infant Mortality Reduction Leadership Award for her work and commitment in galvanizing efforts to design and execute a plan to reduce infant mortality in Michigan. Sonia Hassan, M.D., received the Prematurity Prevention Hero Award for her inspiring leadership, vision, talent, creativity and effectiveness in the prevention of prematurity.

Dr. Hassan is associate dean for Maternal, Perinatal and Child Health for the School of Medicine and director of the PRB's Center for Advanced Obstetrical Care and Research. She was among those who used the celebration to revere the day-to-day work completed by the staff of WSU, the PRB and the DMC.

"Remarkable work evolves from incredible people, and that is you," she said. "Your work brings hope to women and babies every day."

