



Simmons Awards Inaugural Community Research Pilot Grants in Honor of Sarmistha Sen

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The Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center has awarded two grants as part of a new community-engaged research pilot program that honors Sarmistha Sen, M.S., M.S.H.A., a Simmons colleague who recently passed away.

“Sarmistha was passionate about improving cancer disparities by integrating research into clinical care,” says [Jasmin Tiro, Ph.D., M.P.H.](#), Associate Director of Community Outreach, Engagement, and Equity.

The pilot program honors Sen’s efforts and promotes projects that address cancer health equity and build community-university partnerships between organizations in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area and Simmons Cancer Center investigators. The grants are \$50,000 each, delivered over an 18-month project period.

[John Sweetenham, M.D.](#), Associate Director of Clinical Affairs at the Simmons Cancer Center, says improving cancer care for underserved populations within the community is a key component of Simmons’ mission.

“It’s exciting to see funding approved for these two important projects that focus on improving care for particularly vulnerable people affected by cancer – those who are under- or uninsured as well as older populations who may not have easy access to virtual technology,” Dr. Sweetenham says.

“Both these studies will help us gain a better understanding of the barriers to care faced by these patients and will assist us in developing ways to overcome these obstacles and provide the care they deserve,” he adds.

Grant 1: Improving care coordination of cancer survivors with other chronic conditions

[Simon Craddock Lee, Ph.D., M.P.H.](#), Co-Leader of Simmons’ Population Science and Cancer Control Program, and [Bijal Balasubramanian, Ph.D., M.B.B.S.](#), Associate Professor and Regional Dean at the UT Health School of Public Health in Dallas, will lead a new partnership with [Foremost Family Health Centers](#) (FFHC) in Dallas County. The team will identify strategies

to improve care coordination for underserved cancer patients who also struggle with chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension.

FFHC provides affordable and comprehensive medical, dental, and behavioral health services to families and individuals, regardless of their ability to pay.

For the past four years, Drs. Lee and Balasubramanian have studied care coordination in the Parkland Health & Hospital System and will use this grant to explore the role that federally-qualified health centers play in providing cancer survivorship care in Dallas.

Dr. Lee is pleased the value of this type of project is being recognized.

“We are now able to partner with Foremost Family Health Centers to document the challenge of caring for complex cancer patients from the perspective of community-based primary care,” he says.

“Our team focuses on research that will improve health and health care outcomes that really matter to patients,” adds Dr. Balasubramanian. “We are fortunate to be able to collaborate with such highly-respected community leaders.”

Grant 2: Understanding older populations’ barriers to telehealth

[Timothy Hogan, Ph.D.](#), Associate Professor of Population and Data Sciences, and [Robin Higashi, Ph.D.](#), Instructor of Population and Data Sciences, have initiated a novel collaboration with [The Senior Source](#), an organization that provides senior citizens and their families with programs, tools, and resources to thrive.

Dr. Higashi says their project addresses a timely subject – the use of telehealth in the era of COVID-19. By partnering with The Senior Source, they will examine the telehealth skills and preferences of older DFW residents.

With guidance from the Simmons Community Advisory Board, Drs. Hogan and Higashi will also gather data directly from Simmons providers and patients to learn about barriers and facilitators encountered during the rapid implementation of telehealth this past spring.

Renae Perry, LMSW, Chief Operating Officer of The Senior Source, says the organization is excited to be a part of this innovative research project.

“Now more than ever, technology drives connection and access, and this project will ensure the team at The Senior Source will be able to advance efficient technology adoption for older adults in Dallas,” Ms. Perry says.

Dr. Higashi says the research will have long-term implications for cancer care, even beyond Simmons.

“The outcome of this work will be a best practices ‘blueprint’ to support the sustained use of telehealth as part of Simmons cancer care beyond the COVID-19 pandemic,” she says. “Findings can also help other cancer centers around the nation work to effectively integrate telehealth into their daily practices moving forward.”