When you hear the term “intervention research,” you might imagine scientists toiling away in offices and laboratories, far removed from the thorny realities of substance abuse and mental health. But a closer look at the work of CABHR scientists reveals something else entirely: Intervention research is a practical, hands-on process that can have real effects on the daily work of therapists and social work practitioners. CABHR scientists work closely with community agencies and other service providers because, they say, it’s the best way to find and test legitimate solutions to addictions and mental health problems.

“This is very different from ivory tower research,” explains Kit Murphy McNally, executive director of the Benedict Center, a nonprofit agency that serves women in conflict with the law and frequently partners with CABHR researchers. “They are going into the jail with us, and they’re right in the middle of one of the really traumatizing environments that women experience,” Ms. McNally says. CABHR scientist Susan Rose, Ph.D., co-principal investigator of the ongoing Women in Jails project, says CABHR asked the Benedict Center to participate in this study because “they know the community very well. These are professionals who’ve been working in this area for a long time. We could not do what we do without them.”

What is Intervention Research?

The goal of this work is to design, develop, and evaluate interventions to determine which tools are the most effective, and why. CABHR scientist Jonathan Kanter, Ph.D., says people sometimes confuse intervention research with program evaluation. The latter is usually initiated by an organization to determine if it is delivering the right services to the right people, while intervention research is “about scientific model-building, about really understanding things at a theoretical level in a way that would guide program development or inform interventions,” Dr. Kanter says.

Intervention research has always been central to CABHR’s mission. “The studies that were our heart and soul through our developmental course were intervention studies,” says CABHR scientist Audrey Begun, Ph.D. These include two national, multi-site projects funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Project MATCH, which tested treatment matching hypotheses, and Project COMBINE, which evaluated the effectiveness of behavioral treatments with and without medications.

Current intervention research studies at CABHR include:

- A study evaluating a new tool to track lifetime alcohol change attempts, led by CABHR scientists Dr. Begun, Lisa Berger, Ph.D., and Michael Brondino, Ph.D.
- The Women in Jails project, which provides motivational interviewing to help women prepare to address alcohol and drug problems after release, conducted by Drs. Begun and Rose, and Tom LeBel, Ph.D., assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.
- HEART to HEART, a combined HIV and alcohol intervention for inner-city women with alcohol-use disorders and coexisting sexual risk, led by CABHR scientists Laura Otto-Salaj, Ph.D., and Dr. Rose.
- A randomized, controlled trial of two interventions for college freshmen who violate university alcohol policy, led by CABHR affiliated scientist Carol Haertlein Sells, Ph.D.
- A study on the effect of a combination of medication and brief counseling for alcoholic patients in a family medicine setting, conducted by Dr. Berger and Aurora Health Care’s Lance Longo, M.D., and Michael Bohn, M.D.

The CABHR Approach to Intervention Research

CABHR scientists say community partners play a critical role in shaping intervention studies long before the first statistic is collected. Consider a project on depression and stigma in the African American community that Dr. Kanter is developing with Dr. Brondino. To design the study, the two held a series of meetings with a group of licensed African American mental health clinicians practicing in Milwaukee, and also convened a focus group of African American women to discuss depression and stigma. In the past, researchers conducting studies like these might have gone to

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Through my east window, just beyond the East Side’s tree-lined streets and the gabled roofs of historic mansions, lies the open, often spectacularly colorful expanse of Lake Michigan. On the horizon to the south, there are clean medium-rise office buildings, construction cranes for a new hospital wing, and modern high-rise condominiums with dazzling views. When I look away from my computer screen and the paper that clutters my desk and gaze out my windows, I marvel at the good fortune I had to land in this vibrant gem of a city that is Milwaukee.

A different part of the city, however, is hidden from my view. That’s the area west of our campus, where more than one in four residents lives below the poverty line, where 800 victims a year are treated for crime-related gunshot wounds, where rates of sexually transmitted diseases are off the charts, where more than half of all students don’t graduate, and where all indicators of school performance are so far below state and national standards that one local radio commentator and blogger recently suggested that we actually shut the entire school system down. Our city—like many others throughout the country—is plagued by stark social inequalities. I would no sooner ignore this sad reality than I would bury my head in the sand of Bradford Beach.

The lead article in our newsletter highlights CABHR’s successful involvement in intervention research—research focused on programs that solve mental health and addictions problems faced by individuals and families. Unfortunately, this important work barely addresses the dire circumstances in the lives of many Milwaukeeans, the bleak context that foments addictions and mental illness and undermines the effectiveness of treatments.

This is where the importance of CABHR’s work in the area of epidemiology comes in. Epidemiology is the study of the distribution and causes of disease in humankind. It helps to explain how the problems occur in the first place, who is at greatest risk for them, and who gets helped by our interventions. I was reminded of the value of our epidemiological work in a recent e-mail from La Toyia Cannon, the community relations specialist at Milwaukee Health Services. Inviting CABHR scientists to participate in a radio broadcast to discuss health disparities, she noted that we would not know that “health disparities are as bad as they are if it were not for research programs such as yours.”

CABHR epidemiologists recently found that about one in five Milwaukee residents are hazardous drinkers. Young men are at greatest risk for this behavior. When viewed in light of recent national data on drunk driving in Wisconsin, these findings underscore the urgent need for new interventions. In another recent report, CABHR epidemiologists demonstrated that residents of neighborhoods characterized by high poverty and crime rates are at increased risk for cocaine use, suggesting that anti-drug intervention strategies need to focus on addressing neighborhood conditions.

As I write this, CABHR researchers are designing new studies and analyzing existing data to shed new light on the complex problems of substance abuse, depression, STD risk, violence, criminal involvement, and limited access to treatment services.

**WHAT IS CABHR?**

Based in the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s Helen Bader School of Social Welfare, CABHR is a research center led by core academic scientists with broad interests in addictions and behavioral health. CABHR conducts cutting-edge epidemiological, intervention, and clinical research. Its scientists currently hold $1.5 million in research grants.
Berger Wins Support for Hospital Alcohol Intervention
CABHR scientist Lisa Berger, Ph.D., received a 2008–2009 Graduate School Research Committee Award from University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee for her project titled “Social Worker and Physician-Administered Brief Intervention for Hospitalized Patients.” It examines the feasibility of implementing a brief alcohol intervention in a fast-paced hospital environment and pilot-tests the intervention’s efficacy. Dr. Berger ultimately intends to apply for National Institutes of Health funding to continue this work.

Gresnick Honored for NIH Proposals
Eric Gresnick, CABHR’s business and grants officer, received an employee development award from UW–Milwaukee in December. Nominated by CABHR scientists, he was honored for his diligence and persistence in coordinating three multi-institutional proposal submissions to the National Institutes of Health.

Muriuki Reports on Adolescent Health in Kenya
CABHR post-doctoral fellow Andrew Muriuki, Ph.D., presented a policy paper on the effects of household environment on health outcomes for female adolescents in Kenya at the Population Association of America’s annual meeting in New Orleans in April. His travel was funded by a 2007–2008 Population Policy Fellowship from the Population Reference Bureau. He also presented these findings at the 20th National Symposium on Doctoral Research in Social Work in Columbus, Ohio.

New Hire Enhances CABHR’s Statistical Expertise
Nicole Traxel, Ph.D., will join CABHR’s Methods Core in June as a data analyst. A graduate of the educational psychology doctoral program at UW–Milwaukee, Dr. Traxel also holds a master’s degree in social psychology. “Nicole not only is broadly trained in quantitative methods, but because of her psychology background, she also is uniquely positioned to provide methodological consultation to the social scientists at CABHR,” says Michael Brondino, Ph.D., leader of CABHR’s Methods Core.

CABHR Shares Findings from Women in Jails Study
At the Research Society on Alcoholism meeting in Washington, D.C. in June, CABHR scientist Audrey Begun, Ph.D., and project coordinator Barb Teske-Young will present a poster on the initial findings of the Women in Jails project, an ongoing study of the effectiveness of alcohol and drug intervention among women in Milwaukee jails. They report that of the 1,053 women evaluated as they entered jail, 67 percent screened positive for alcohol and drug problems.

Studies Target Women’s Mental Health and Teen Drug Use
CABHR scientists Susan Rose, Ph.D., and Mike Brondino, Ph.D., recently received grants from Aurora Health Care through the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Medicine and Public Health’s Wisconsin Partnership Fund. With these funds, Dr. Rose will study the mental health treatment needs of poor, substance abusing women who have had contact with the justice system. This project is led by Michael Bohn, M.D., of the Aurora Psychiatric Hospital, in partnership with Kit Murphy McNally, executive director of Milwaukee’s Benedict Center. (For more on the Benedict Center, see page 4.) Dr. Brondino will test and evaluate brief motivational interviewing for teens in five Milwaukee-area schools who are using drugs or are at risk for substance abuse.

Team Reports on HIV and Alcohol Intervention for Women
CABHR scientist Laura Otto-Salaj, Ph.D., will share data from HEART to HEART—a combined HIV and alcohol intervention for women with alcohol-use disorders and coexisting sexual risk—at the Research Society on Alcoholism (RSA) meeting in June. Of the 406 women screened for inclusion in the study, 65.6 percent demonstrated high levels of symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder, Dr. Otto-Salaj says. She also shared these data at a National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism conference in Washington, D.C. in April.

HEART to HEART project coordinator Lisa Blaeser will present a paper at RSA on the challenges of recruiting women with alcohol problems to take part in this study, given the changing treatment infrastructure in Wisconsin. Finally, research assistant Jessica Penwell Barnett presented “The Relationship of Partner Stability to Sexual Satisfaction,” a substudy of HEART to HEART, at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association in Chicago in April.

Fendrich Lectures on HIV Risk
CABHR Director Michael Fendrich, Ph.D., delivered the Michael M. Davis Seminar on April 2 at the University of Chicago School of Social Services Administration. Dr. Fendrich’s presentation highlighted his work on changes in risk behavior among men who have sex with men, based on two surveys conducted in Chicago. The seminar is one of a year-long series covering the health of vulnerable populations.

New Tool Uncovers Details of Lifetime Alcohol Change Attempts
CABHR scientists Audrey Begun, Ph.D., and Lisa Berger, Ph.D., will present a poster at the Research Society on Alcoholism meeting in June on the Lifecourse Alcohol Change Attempt Assessment (LACAA) project, which explores recovery attempts by individuals with alcohol dependence. The LACAA is a personalized calendar including significant personal and historical milestones, such as the birth of a child and the Green Bay Packers Super Bowl game. The scientists are testing the LACAA on local participants in Project COMBINE, a national, multi-site study that evaluated the effectiveness of behavioral treatments for alcoholism with and without medication.

CABHR Highlights Caregiving and Mental Illness
In April, CABHR and UW–Milwaukee’s department of applied gerontology co-hosted a presentation by Jan Greenberg, Ph.D., of UW–Madison, who is studying the long-term toll of caregiving on the aging parents of individuals with schizophrenia and autism.

In a related topic, CABHR scientist Virginia Stoffel, Ph.D., is currently working with occupational therapy graduate student Heather Miller to develop a “photovoice” project about the joys and challenges experienced by parents with serious mental illness. The project combines first-person writing with photographs taken by these parents.

CABHR Scientists Publish Findings
The following journals recently accepted articles by CABHR scientists: Addictive Behaviors • American Journal of Preventive Medicine • American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation • Archives of Sexual Behavior • Behavioral Modification • Clinical Case Studies • Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease • Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment • Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions • Journal of Urban Health • Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health • Psychological Record • Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training • Social Work • World Psychiatry. For details on these articles, see www4.uwm.edu/cabhr/research_news.cfm.

For more details on CABHR research, visit www4.uwm.edu/cabhr/active_projects.cfm
MEET CABHR SCIENTISTS

John Dellinger, Ph.D.
CABHR affiliated scientist; Professor of Health Sciences, UW–Milwaukee

A neurotoxicologist who served four years as director of the Illinois Poison Center, Dr. Dellinger currently leads the Great Lakes Native American Research Center for Health, which is supported by the Indian Health Service and the National Institutes of Health. His past work, including studies on developmental impairments in infants whose mothers ate fish contaminated with mercury and PCBs, has been supported by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences at the National Institutes of Health, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Much of Dr. Dellinger’s research involves respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), or the autonomic tendency of the heart rate to slow down as we exhale, returning the body to a relaxed state after stressful events. Dr. Dellinger has used this measure, developed by Stephen Porges, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago, to study the effect of legal and illegal drugs on the performance of complex tasks, like flying aircraft.

Dr. Dellinger recently completed a sabbatical in Antigua, where he conducted two studies at Crossroads Centre, the rehabilitation program founded by musician Eric Clapton. In one study, he used RSA and other measures to determine the re-establishment of normal neurologic function during withdrawal and treatment for substance abuse. He also used CABHR’s DatStat software (in collaboration with Lisa Berger, Ph.D., Michael Brondino, Ph.D., and Adam Lippert of CABHR) to initiate detailed chart review and outcome assessments of clients who attend Crossroads’ 28-day rehabilitation program.

For profiles of other CABHR scientists, visit www4.uwm.edu/cabhr/facstaff.cfm

POPULAR SUMMER SEMINARS OFFER METHODS TRAINING

For the third year in a row, CABHR will host a series of summer seminars providing valuable training in research methods, led by nationally known experts.

Topics in this year’s series include an introduction to social network analysis (including hands-on training with the UCINET software package) and a workshop on advanced quantitative methods for social science and public health researchers, co-sponsored by the Graduate School at UW–Milwaukee. Another seminar will explore the value of university–community partnerships in preventing delinquency and youth violence.

“These seminars provide social, behavioral, and public health researchers with opportunities to learn the latest techniques for collecting and using data,” says CABHR director Michael Fendrich, Ph.D. “The seminars have become an important community resource, helping social scientists both on and off campus increase their research competency.” In previous years, the seminars attracted participants from across Wisconsin and from neighboring states.

Dr. Fendrich adds that CABHR is committed to continuing these programs in the future, and is already planning next summer’s seminars. Space is limited, so register now for this summer’s programs.

SEEKING INTERVENTIONS THAT WORK

people in the field with a research study fully planned, Dr. Kanter says. “That’s not the model we’re trying to use here. We’re trying to work with the community to figure out the right questions to ask and how to ask them, and to build the project collaboratively from the ground up,” he says. And this labor-intensive process is usually conducted before scientists apply for grants to fund the project.

What’s the Pay-off of Intervention Research?

CABHR scientists hope their findings not only influence future research and help organizations choose effective tools, but also affect public policy. “We hope that people who have the power to do so will allocate resources to help others use the information we’ve collected to reduce risk behaviors or increase health behaviors,” says Dr. Otto-Salaj. But these researchers are also driven by simple scientific curiosity. “I worked as a therapist myself for 20 years,” Dr. Rose says. “I’m interested in understanding some of these issues because I faced them all the time. How do you know what you’re doing is effective? Are there things that you can do that are more effective? Those are the questions that therapists ask themselves all the time.”

Community Partners: CABHR and the Benedict Center

As a Milwaukee organization that provides support to women who have had contact with the criminal justice system, the Benedict Center has worked closely with CABHR on three recent projects, including the ongoing Women in Jails project. Executive director Kit Murphy McNally says she likes partnering with CABHR because so little research is ordinarily conducted on incarcerated women with substance and mental health problems.

“Having this kind of high-level research on women in Milwaukee is just critical,” Ms. McNally says. “It gives us real insight that I don’t think we would have otherwise.” She also likes knowing that such studies could influence policy and practice in communities around the world.

Ms. McNally has been particularly impressed with one element of the partnership: the focus groups that CABHR researchers have conducted with the women the Benedict Center serves. “The women are really honored to be asked by a researcher to talk about what’s going on with them,” she says.

She admits that she was initially concerned that the counseling offered to incarcerated women in the jails project was too brief to make a difference, so she’s eager to see the study results. But she remains committed to helping test new approaches.

“It’s very complex, all of the things going on with people in poverty, people with addictions, people who are in conflict with the law,” McNally says. “All of us doing this work need good sound research. We need to be able to be evaluated, to pay attention to the results, and to make changes based on what we learn.”