

Risch Funded to Study Risk Factors of Pancreatic Cancer

ALTHOUGH IT IS THE FOURTH MOST FREQUENT cause of cancer death, there has been relatively little research done on the risk factors of pancreatic cancer. More than 30,000 new cases were diagnosed in 2002, of these, only 5-10% are caused by tobacco smoking, chronic pancreatitis, and germline genetic mutations, the three known risk factors for the disease. It is unknown why such a large number of patients without exposure to the known risk factors continue to develop the disease at a rapid rate. Yale Cancer Center Researcher and Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health, Harvey A. Risch, MD, PhD, has been awarded \$3.65 million from the National Institutes of Health to identify and evaluate additional factors associated with the development of pancreatic cancer.

Following twenty years of investigation into ovarian cancer, Dr. Risch began studying pancreatic cancer a little over a year ago and has hypothesized that the risk for developing the disease is related to the exposure of the pancreas to nitrites and to chronic excess gastric acidity. Risch has also theorized that the presence of *Helicobacter pylori*, a spiral shaped bacterium that lives in the stomach of about 30% of the population but remains asymptomatic in the majority of individuals, may also increase chance of developing pancreatic cancer. Because *Helicobacter* does not colonize the pancreas, Risch believes the combination of its presence in the stomach and other risk factors increases the incidence of pancreatic cancer.

"This is the first theory that really looks at the physiological process of how pancreatic cancer develops and what components are synergistically working together to cause the cancer," Risch explained.

"The outstanding operation of the Rapid Case Ascertainment (RCA) Shared Resource at Yale Cancer Center has helped us to receive funding to test valid epidemiological theories associated with cancer of the pancreas" Dr. Risch explained. Pancreatic cancer is often detected in the late stages of the disease and has a five-year survival rate of only 5%, which presents obstacles when trying to study the disease. The RCA Shared Resource will allow Risch and his colleagues to identify and contact patients for participation at the onset of their diagnosis providing timely data to analyze the possible link between *Helicobacter pylori* and pancreatic cancer.

The five-year population-based study will analyze 600 patients in Connecticut with cancer of the pancreas who have been identified by the RCA. Small blood samples will be taken from the patient for evaluation of *Helicobacter pylori* presence as well as possible germline genetic mutations related to the way the body reacts to *Helicobacter*. Study staff will also interview patients in an effort to gather information on other etiologic factors, such as smoking, diet, and exercise. Risch and his colleagues at Yale School of Medicine, including Herbert Yu, MD, PhD, Susan Mayne, PhD, Dhanpat Jain, MD, Fred Gorelick, MD, Mark Topazian, MD, and Mark Kidd, MD, will evaluate the data collected from the patients and compare it with information collected from a control group matched to the cases by age and gender. Preliminary analysis of the etiology of pancreatic cancer by Dr. Risch was published in the July 2003 issue of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*. Dr. Risch can be contacted at harvey.risch@yale.edu or at 203.785.2848.



Dr. Harvey Risch

Jerry Dornan

research

Dr. Psyrrri Teams with Head and Neck Cancer Services for Comprehensive Patient Care

DR. AMANDA PSYRRI, Assistant Professor of Medical Oncology, has partnered with the Head and Neck Cancer Services group in the Department of Otolaryngology to benefit patients with head and neck cancer. Dr. Psyrrri joins a team of experts assembled to care for patients including internationally recognized otolaryngologist, Clarence Sasaki, MD, other surgeons, care coordinators, nutritionists, and physical and speech therapists.

"I am excited about my collaboration with a world class head and neck surgeon and I am thrilled to be contributing to state of the art management of head and neck malignancies and a patient-oriented approach to clinical care," Dr. Psyrrri said.

Dr. Amanda Psyrrri



Jerry Dornan

Each year about 40,000 new cases of head and neck cancer are diagnosed nationally. Tobacco and alcohol abuse are the major risk factors for the development of head and neck cancer, although cancer of the oropharynx can also be caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV) in patients without alcohol or tobacco history. Standard treatments for head and neck cancer often lead to significant speech and swallowing impairment, which has prompted many researchers to investigate better methods for treatment.

Dr. Psyrrri has opened several new clinical trials using chemotherapy and radiation for larynx-preservation in patients with locally advanced, stage III and stage IV, head and neck cancer. Yale Cancer Center is one of the leading participating institutions in the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG), and as a result, many new cooperative group trials in head and neck cancer have been developed at Yale. Dr. Psyrrri has designed trials, which utilize novel agents for patients with locally recurrent and metastatic disease.

Dr. Psyrrri joined the faculty at Yale in 2002 and was promoted to Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine, Medical Oncology in July 2003. In addition to her clinical responsibilities, Dr. Psyrrri spends a significant portion of her time conducting research in head and neck cancer. She is the laboratory chair in one of the ECOG trials and is researching molecular predictors of response to Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) inhibitors, which are promising agents in the treatment of solid tumors.

For more information or to schedule an appointment with her in the clinic, please call 203.785.4191 or contact her directly at diamando.psyrrri@yale.edu. For more information on the clinical trials open for head and neck cancer patients, please contact at Clinical Trials Office at (203) 785-5702.