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Dear Supporter,

It's mid-August, summer is nearing its end, and the work goes on. Here's your brief.

News

Late summer and early fall mean one thing in the March of Dimes research department: Prematurity Research Center (PRC) site visits — or in other words, in person visits to our six PRCs to tour laboratories, check on research progress, and facilitate collaboration across the half dozen centers.

We kicked off the visits in mid-July at our newest research hub, the Texas Collaborative PRC, which unites scientists from The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) at Galveston and UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. At UTMB, our team reviewed ongoing progress in the construction and

validation of the PRC's landmark pregnancy-on-a-chip system, which emulates the biology of human pregnancy in vitro. This innovative platform will enable researchers to investigate pregnancy biology and test new therapeutic approaches while reducing reliance on animal models. At UT Southwestern, we observed strong progress in enrollment for a vital clinical study examining whether maternal malnutrition and cervical and placental dysfunction are linked to preterm birth. The site's high patient volume, efficient research infrastructure, and effective leadership enabled the team to reach enrollment targets in record-breaking time, providing great confidence for future clinical studies.

Late July was all about California. First was our Stanford PRC, where investigators are integrating large-scale molecular datasets with electronic health record data to develop new diagnostic tools for preterm birth and maternal-newborn complications. In parallel, they are using AI-driven drug repurposing to identify novel treatment strategies for preventing preterm birth, with the most promising candidates expected to advance to clinical testing soon. Next was our PRC at the University of California, San Francisco, where investigators are using AI and advanced computational approaches to tackle some of pregnancy's most vexing biological questions. Their work is helping accelerate the translation of laboratory discoveries into potential clinical solutions for mothers and babies.

Finally, just a few days ago, we concluded our visit to Philadelphia, where we heard from University of Pennsylvania PRC scientists about their mouthwash study, a joint project with our Ohio Collaborative PRC. The study found that prenatal mouthwash use was associated with significantly lower rates of hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, including preeclampsia. We also heard from investigators at the March of Dimes Research Center for Advancing Maternal Health Equity, who shared preliminary findings from their randomized controlled trial evaluating whether integrating doulas throughout pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period can reduce maternal depression and anxiety.

Next up is our Ohio Collaborative PRC, our London PRC, and our PRC-wide annual symposium, once again held in person this year at our D.C. headquarters in November.

Read more about our PRCs.

Awards

We've got three awards open right now:

Proposals for Discovery Grants, awarded to scientists proposing translational research in the field of maternal-fetal health, are welcome until September 8.

Nominations for our Agnes Higgins Award in Maternal-Fetal Nutrition, an annual award honoring a leading pregnancy and infant nutrition researcher, educator, or clinician, will be accepted until September 16.

Nominations for the March of Dimes Richard B. Johnston, Jr., MD Prize, our achievement award, can be submitted until October 2.

Blog

The beauty of science is that every finding is useful — even if the obvious hypothesis doesn't pan out. This was the case for one Washington University scientist who used March of Dimes-funded data to make two counterintuitive findings about healthy food intake among African American pregnant women in St. Louis: women who lived closer to fast food chains ate more legumes than those who lived farther, and women who lived farther from grocery stores ate more legumes than those who lived closer. While more research is needed to hash out the links, the associations imply that study participants who ate the most legumes likely bought them at fast food chains near their homes instead of nearby grocers, showing, as the author of the study told March of Dimes, that "healthy foods can still be chosen in unhealthy environments." She added that the findings underscore the need to educate both nutritional counselors and low-income pregnant women about the wide array of healthy foods so expecting mothers can eat more anti-inflammatory foods regardless of where they are purchased.

Read the blog.

Podcast

Our latest MODCAST is a joy. This 39th episode centers around 2025 March of Dimes Basil O'Connor Starter Scholar Research Award winner Dr. Christina Megli and her previous discovery of the existence of 'first responder' macrophage cells inside the amniotic sac in healthy pregnancy. Since finding the cells almost by accident, Dr. Megli has been studying them to learn where they originate, why they migrate to the sac, how they act in times of infection, and what they might help scientists learn about preterm birth. During her inquiry as part of the grant, Dr. Megli has uncovered a key conversation involving macrophage cells in healthy pregnancy: epithelial cells found in the amnion, a membrane that lines the amniotic sac, are giving macrophages instructions to quiet down proteins called matrix metalloproteinases that can become too active in times of infection and lead to rupture of membranes and preterm birth. Dr. Megli is already hypothesizing new biomarkers and therapeutics from this work that can slow or prevent preterm birth.

Listen to or watch our latest MODCAST.

Publications

Maternal Consumption of Artificially Sweetened Beverages in Pregnancies and Biomarkers of Fecundity in Adult Sons

The transition from pediatric to adult healthcare in spina bifida: an interview-based measure

Versatile Glycan Probes for Multiplatform Investigation of Glycan Interactions with Proteins, Viruses, and Cells

Genomic approaches to understanding pregnancy phenotypes and birth outcomes and their links with long-term maternal and offspring health — the value of distinguishing maternal and fetal genetic effects

Linking maternal blood pressure with fetal cerebral haemodynamics and cortical growth in congenital heart disease

Racial and Ethnic Differences in Healthcare Access and Utilization Among Adults With Congenital Heart Defects in the Congenital Heart Survey to Recognize Outcomes, Needs and Well-Being (CH STRONG)

Nothing more for now. See you in September.

Dr. Emre Seli
Chief Scientific Advisor
March of Dimes

HEALTHY MOMS. STRONG BABIES.

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