Chair of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine Builds On Success in Improving Patients’ Quality of Life

R. Sean Morrison, MD, has been appointed Ellen and Howard C. Katz Chair of the Brookdale Department of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. Dr. Morrison, who joined Mount Sinai in 1995, has focused on one goal throughout his career: Improving quality of life for patients and families.

“Our mission is to ensure that persons living with serious illness, multiple chronic conditions, physical disability, or cognitive impairment live as well and as long as possible,” Dr. Morrison says. “We try to establish what goals are important to our patients and help them to achieve them.”

Dr. Morrison will continue as Director of the Hertzberg Palliative Care Institute and the National Palliative Care Research Center. He succeeds Albert L. Siu, MD, who was Chair of the Department for 15 years. “My No.1 objective is to build on the success of my predecessors—Drs. Robert Butler, Christine Cassel, and Albert Siu. They created the first Department of Geriatrics, and then the first integrated Department of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine in the country, and built it into the nation’s leading academic program focused on the needs of older adults and those with serious illness.”

The Mount Sinai Hospital’s geriatrics program ranked third in the nation in the 2017–2018 U.S. News & World Report “Best Hospitals” Guide. And in February, the palliative care programs at The Mount Sinai Hospital and Mount Sinai Beth Israel earned recertification by The Joint Commission. “Mount Sinai was one of the first five hospitals to receive Advanced Certification in Palliative Care in

A Large-Scale Study Finds Genes Linked to Obesity

R. Sean Morrison, MD, at the Wiener Family Palliative Care Unit at The Mount Sinai Hospital, which recently earned recertification by The Joint Commission.

Diet and physical activity are not the only factors that determine how easily a person gains or loses weight. A recent study led by researchers at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and other institutions of the Genetic Investigation of ANthropometric Traits (GIANT) consortium has found that 13 genes may play an important role, as well.

According to the study, published in the January 2018 issue of Nature Genetics, these 13 genes carry variations associated with body mass index (BMI).

“Our study has identified genes that play a crucial role in the neuronal control of body weight,” says lead researcher Ruth Loos, PhD, Professor of Environmental Medicine and Public Health at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, and Director of the Genetics of Obesity and Related Metabolic Traits Program
The 20 physicians, nurse practitioners, and nurses who participated in two medical relief missions to Puerto Rico in October following the devastation of Hurricane Maria were saluted by Mount Sinai leadership at a reception Wednesday, January 17, held on The Mount Sinai Hospital campus.

The volunteers—representing all hospitals in the Mount Sinai Health System—were part of a massive effort involving the New York State Governor’s Office and the Department of Health, along with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Greater New York Hospital Association, the Healthcare Association of New York State, the New York State Nurses Association, and 1199 SEIU.

“For long hours, you worked in makeshift clinics, you helped several thousand American citizens cope with the loss of hygienic living conditions and the scarcity of critical medicines, and you brought humanity back to those who felt they had been forgotten,” Dennis S. Charney, MD, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Dean, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, and President for Academic Affairs, Mount Sinai Health System, told the volunteers.

“You did not know what to expect, where you would be, the types of patients you would treat, or the conditions where you would live,” added Kevin Chason, DO, Clinical Director of Emergency Management, Mount Sinai Health System, and Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. “Still, you managed to experience something few are able to do today in the practice of medicine—you were able to feel what it is like to practice medicine in the purest form.”

Volunteers were presented with an inscribed keepsake from Mount Sinai leadership recognizing their contributions. The Mount Sinai Health System also received a plaque, which was unveiled at the reception, from Governor Andrew Cuomo and others that thanked the Mount Sinai Health System and said, in part: “Your work exemplifies health care providers' highest values of service and caring.”

2011,” Dr. Morrison says. “Since that time, our teams, sites, and number of patients have multiplied considerably. Yet our services continue to offer an unwavering quality of care to seriously ill patients and their families.” He thanked the Mount Sinai Health System’s leadership for their support and thanked every team member for their dedication “to removing unnecessary suffering from the world.”

Dr. Morrison earned his MD at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. He completed his residency at New York-Presbyterian Weill Cornell Medical Center and his fellowship training in geriatric medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. In 1995, he helped found Mount Sinai’s palliative care program, which started with a team of four: Dr. Morrison; Jane Morris, MS, RN, ACHPN; Judith Ahronheim, MD; and Diane E. Meier, MD, who is a MacArthur Fellow and the Catherine Gaisman Professor of Medical Ethics, and Professor of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. Dr. Meier now serves as the Director of Mount Sinai’s Center to Advance Palliative Care, an organization that Dr. Morrison collaborates closely with in disseminating innovative models of palliative care education and practice throughout the United States.

This is a crucial time for geriatrics and palliative care in the United States. “Those over age 80 are the fastest growing segment of the American population, and older adults living with serious and complex medical illness account for more than 60 percent of all health care spending,” Dr. Morrison says. “As baby boomers continue to age, all health care professionals will need to have the core knowledge and skills of geriatrics and palliative care in order to deliver high-value health care.”

His goals for the Department are to develop new models of clinical care to match the needs of an aging population; to create the science and evidence base that supports the care; and to train a workforce that is well prepared to care for older adults and those with serious illness. “This is the Department that created the fields of geriatrics and palliative care,” Dr. Morrison says. “My hope is that we become the Department that is responsible for completely infusing these specialties into the genome of American medicine.”
Mount Sinai Heart is reducing readmissions and improving quality of life for congestive heart failure (CHF) patients with remote monitoring using new devices and apps, as well as old-fashioned compassionate care. “We are creating a multimodal way of keeping an eye on our patients after they have left the hospital so that we can optimize their medications and keep them at home—where they want to be—rather than in the hospital,” says Sean P. Pinney, MD, Professor of Medicine (Cardiology), Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, and Director of Heart Failure and Transplantation, Mount Sinai Health System.

One of the strategies involves the ReDS™ (Remote Dielectric Sensing) system, a wearable vest made by Sensible Medical Innovations. ReDS is based on technology that allows the military to “see through walls” and find survivors in collapsed buildings. In a medical setting, a device sees through the walls of the chest, sending an electromagnetic beam through the middle lobe of the right lung, measuring the lung fluid. Based on the readings, a physician might decide to raise or lower the dosage of diuretics, or hospitalize the patient if there is an extreme overload of fluid.

Dr. Pinney’s team is participating in a randomized multicenter clinical trial of the device, sponsored by Sensible Medical, that began in September 2015 and is to be completed in June 2018. The trial will compare the readmission rates of 380 patients hospitalized for heart failure. All participants are receiving the standard care, including follow-up phone calls and outpatient visits, but one group also goes home with a ReDS vest, with their readings transmitted to care providers. Since July 2017, Mount Sinai has also been using the device in its Rapid Follow-Up Clinic for recently discharged CHF patients. “We are one of only three centers to do this, so we are in the vanguard,” Dr. Pinney says. Among the 28 patients who have used the system since July, the 30-day readmission rate was about 9 percent, compared with 22 percent for heart failure patients overall.

Mount Sinai is also using apps to help monitor CHF patients. One is HealthPROMISE, a system for iPhone and Android, developed by the Mount Sinai AppLab. Patients are sent home with a blood pressure cuff and a scale that send data through the app to care providers. “We can track blood pressure, weight, and the answers to simple questions about the patients’ symptoms,” Dr. Pinney says. A pilot study by Dr. Pinney’s team found that of 52 subjects using the app, four were readmitted within 50 days of discharge. “The CHF patients had a 7 percent readmission rate compared to the national readmission rate of more than 25 percent within 50 days of discharge,” according to an abstract of the study, presented in October 2017 at the Connected Health Conference in Boston.

Another app, being developed by Dr. Pinney’s group and a startup company, RecoverLINK, is also in clinical trials. It works similarly to HealthPROMISE but asks more detailed questions about patients’ symptoms, mood, compliance with medication, and general quality of life. In addition to remote monitoring, patients also receive personalized video messages from providers.

Dr. Pinney says that heart failure patients often underestimate the severity of their condition, saying “I just have a weak heart,” when the median survival after diagnosis is about five years—“as bad as many cancers, or worse.” He sees a significant opportunity to improve the lives of CHF patients. “There is a need to identify these individuals, refer them to a heart failure center of excellence like ours at Mount Sinai, and take advantage of the pharmacologic and device therapies that now exist.”
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at The Charles Bronfman Institute for Personalized Medicine. “They act in the brain in pathways that may affect people’s food intake, hunger, and satiety. Individuals who inherit these genetic variations may find it harder to eat less or stop eating, compared to those who did not inherit these variations.”

The study, led by Dr. Loos and Joel Hirschhorn, MD, PhD, Concordia Professor of Pediatrics and Professor of Genetics at Boston Children’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School, and Co-director of the Broad Institute Metabolism Program, also involved the collaboration of more than 250 international research institutions that comprise the GIANT consortium.

In the past decade, researchers in the GIANT consortium have performed genome-wide screens in hundreds of thousands of individuals to identify genetic variations associated with obesity and BMI. In this new study, the consortium focused on a specific set of genetic variations that are likely to affect the function of genes and their proteins—an approach that expedited the discovery of the causal genes that affect body weight.

Genetic data from more than 700,000 individuals and 125 different studies were combined to form the largest genetic association study to date. The researchers identified a total of 14 genetic variations in 13 genes, including a “stop” variation in a gene called MC4R that causes carriers to weigh 15 pounds more, on average, than individuals who do not carry the “stop” variation.

Genes contain the information needed to make proteins. In the case of a “stop” variation, the translation from gene to protein is halted, and the protein is shorter than normal. About 1 in 5,000 individuals carries the “stop” variant in MC4R, which causes the gene not to produce the protein needed to inform the brain to stop eating. While this variant was identified two decades ago in individuals with extreme and early onset obesity, the new study shows that it also affects body weight in the general population.

Eight of the 13 genes identified were newly implicated in obesity and will require further follow-up to understand the mechanisms through which they affect body weight. By knowing the genes and the biological pathways through which they work, researchers believe they are a few steps closer to understanding why some people gain weight more easily than others, which is critical for developing effective treatments.

Genes are not the only factor in determining body weight, and it is important to be physically active and maintain a healthy diet, Dr. Loos says. However, she says, “Our study has provided new potential targets for therapeutic interventions, and may even help personalize treatment for carriers of the genetic variations.”

Amos, Kravis Children’s Hospital’s New Staff Member

Thanks to a grant from the Mount Sinai Auxiliary Board, Kravis Children’s Hospital at Mount Sinai recently expanded Paws & Play, its innovative facility dog program, by acquiring Amos, a 2-year-old golden doodle. A full-time employee of Kravis Children’s Hospital, Amos provides comfort to pediatric inpatients under the direction of his handler, Tori Zucker, MEd, Certified Child Life Specialist.

Amos is the nephew of Kravis Children’s Hospital’s first facility dog, Professor Bunsen Honeydew, who joined Paws & Play last year when the program was launched. Paws & Play, supported by PetSmart Charities®, is the first facility dog program of its kind in New York State.

Facility dogs can see high-risk patients multiple times a week and become part of the care model. “Seeing the dog creates a dynamic of trust, care, and love,” says Diane C. Rode, MPS, Child Life Program Director. “This humanizes the health care environment.”

The fact that Amos underwent weeks of physical therapy to his leg after surgery when he was a puppy helps create an even deeper bond with young patients, according to Ms. Zucker.

In addition to comforting children who are undergoing medical procedures, Amos is a popular attendee at Kravis’ parent coffee hour, a support group for patients’ parents. He also provides support to children whose parents are facing severe illnesses or end-of-life situations.
Pediatric Patients Enjoy a Valentine’s Reunion

Dozens of pediatric cardiology patients and their families reunited with the doctors, nurses, and staff who previously administered life-changing care to them during an afternoon of celebration and fun on Wednesday, February 7, at the 32nd Annual Valentine’s Reunion Party. Held in the Annenberg West Lobby, the event was hosted by the Children’s Heart Center at Mount Sinai—an alliance between Mount Sinai and the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia—with the help of nonprofit organizations Project Sunshine and Harboring Hearts.

During this hospital visit, the children played tabletop curling and other games inspired by the Winter Olympics, participated in creating a group mural with the theme “How I am strong like an Olympian,” and made heart-shaped crafts. Says Ira Parness, MD, Chief of the Division of Pediatric Cardiology, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai: “Not to see a doctor, not to get prodded, poked, or examined, but to have fun. It is the ultimate reward.”

Students Stay Strong Through Powerlifting

Three second-year medical students, Sayeeda Chowdhury, Lucy O’Shaughnessy, and Chuma Nwachukwu, have brought the sport of powerlifting to their classmates at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. Since establishing Sinai Strong, a student powerlifting club—whose advisor is Dennis S. Charney, MD, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Dean, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, and President for Academic Affairs, Mount Sinai Health System—they have taught more than 50 of their colleagues the art of the sport. Powerlifting, which differs from conventional weightlifting, involves three tests of strength: the squat, bench press, and deadlift, a movement in which a weighted barbell is lifted from the floor to the level of the hips. In January, Ms. Chowdhury, Ms. O’Shaughnessy, and Mr. Nwachukwu participated in the Northeast Iron Beast Winter Classic V in upstate New York, a powerlifting competition in which each competitor has three attempts at each of the three lifts to move the most weight possible. Their best lifts were a 265-pound squat, a 308-pound deadlift, and a 600-pound deadlift, respectively. The three students competed against many other lifters of the same gender, age division, and weight class but not against each other. Ms. Chowdhury won a gold medal in the juniors age division, and Ms. O’Shaughnessy won a bronze medal in the open age division.

Teaching Youngsters About Robotic Surgery

Physicians and staff from the Milton and Carroll Petrie Department of Urology in January hosted separate visits from two groups of youngsters from Battery Park City—Girl Scout Troop 3302 and fourth graders from P.S. 276—who gathered in the Guggenheim Pavilion to learn about robotic surgery. The children were able to test some of the equipment used in surgical procedures, and Ketan K. Badani, MD, Vice Chair, Department of Urology and Robotic Operations and Director of Robotics at Mount Sinai West, and Vannita Simma-Chiang, MD, Assistant Professor of Urology, were on hand to answer their questions. The Girl Scouts, an organization committed to preparing girls for leadership, encourages its members to explore different aspects of science, technology, engineering, and math through its “fun with purpose” K-12 curriculum.

Around the Health System

Riley Ortiz posed with Elmo at the party.

Sadio Sissoko and her mother, Aminata Kane (center), reunited with Sangeeta Sharma, MBBS, Assistant Professor, Pediatrics (left) and Rajesh Shenoy, MD, Assistant Professor, Pediatrics (Cardiology).
Celebrating Brain Awareness Week March 12 – 18

To commemorate Brain Awareness Week, The Friedman Brain Institute, Mentoring in Neuroscience Discovery at Sinai (MINDS), and the Center for Excellence in Youth Education (CEYE) are joining the Dana Foundation in its global efforts to increase awareness of the progress and benefits of brain research. Faculty, staff, and the public are invited to participate in the following events:

6th Annual Brain Awareness Fair
Meet Mount Sinai’s top scientists and doctors who study and treat the brain, play interactive brain games, see how neurosurgeons work, and walk through an oversized inflatable model of the brain to learn about brain anatomy.

Tuesday, March 13
11 am – 3 pm
Program for invited New York City students
3 – 5 pm
Open to the public
Guggenheim Pavilion

3rd Annual Studying the Brain: An Evening of Science Storytelling
Mount Sinai neuroscientists present personal stories that explore the deeply human side of brain research. Reservations are free, but required. For tickets, email: casey.lardner@icahn.mssm.edu.

Friday, March 16
6:30 – 8:30 pm
El Barrio’s ArtSpace PS109
215 East 99th Street

A Commitment to Patient Safety
The Mount Sinai Hospital will host three patient safety leaders in March to help commemorate “Patient Safety Awareness Week 2018.” All faculty and staff are encouraged to participate.

Patty Skolnik, Founder, and President/Chief Executive Officer, Citizens for Patient Safety, presents “Can a Conversation Change an Outcome? Can a Conversation Save a Life?”
Monday, March 12
10 am
Hatch Auditorium

Jason Adelman, MD, Chief Patient Safety Officer and Associate Chief Quality Officer, Columbia University Medical Center/New York-Presbyterian Hospital, presents “Gizmos and Gadgets: The Ways We Can Use Technology to Prevent Medical Errors.”
Wednesday, March 14
10:30 am
Goldwurm Auditorium

Marc Napp, MD, Senior Vice President for Medical Affairs and Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Mount Sinai Health System, presents “A Lesson on Just Culture.”
Thursday, March 15
10 am
Goldwurm Auditorium

Registration is complimentary, and CME and SWCE credits are available. To register or to learn more, visit https://mssm.cloud-cme.com/.

Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center Hosts Conference As It Celebrates 50 Years of Achievement
A two-day conference, “Ending Violence Against Children: Developing a Roadmap to a Healthy Childhood and Adolescence,” kicks off a year of events that commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center. Held in collaboration with the World Childhood Foundation USA, the conference aims to raise awareness of how common and pervasive violence against children is, and to impart practical strategies to better identify and treat these victims, with the goal of ending violence against young people.

Featured speakers include: David Finkelhor, PhD, Director of the Crimes against Children Research Center and Co-Director of the Family Research Laboratory and Professor of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire; and Vincent J. Felitti, MD, Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Diego.

The conference will be led by the Center’s director, Angela Diaz, MD, PhD, MPH, the Jean C. and James W. Crystal Professor of Pediatrics, and Professor of Environmental Medicine and Public Health, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai; and Joanna Rubinstein, DDS, PhD, President and CEO, World Childhood Foundation USA.

Thursday, March 22, and Friday, March 23
8 am: Breakfast
9 am – 5 pm: Program
Stern Auditorium

For more information, email patientsafety@mountsinai.org.

Mount Sinai Transformation Update
For the most recent updates on Mount Sinai’s downtown transformation, please go to:
http://www.mountsinai.org/locations/downtown