



RESEARCH ROUNDUP

SPRING 2025

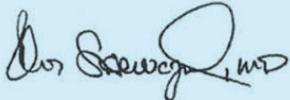


HMH RESEARCH NEWS



MESSAGE FROM THE **PRESIDENT** OF **ACADEMICS,** **RESEARCH, AND** **INNOVATION**

The ecosystem of Academics, Research, and Innovation continues to make us all better. We saw an impressive array of research at the fourth annual HMHRI Research Symposium in May - and we continue to foster partnerships and collaborations. Fortune magazine and others continue to recognize these efforts.



Ihor Sawczuk, M.D., FACS



NOTE FROM THE **VICE** **PRESIDENT**

Nurse-scientists, educators, microbiologists, and an incredible wealth of talent across the Hackensack Meridian Health network is “lifting all boats” for us - and for our patients.



Cheryl Pinto, RN, MBA, CIP
Vice President of Research and Regulatory Affairs



HMHRI 4th Annual Research Symposium: CAR T Cells, Cannabis, Environmental Health, and More

CAR T cells’ latest developments, cannabis as witnessed from the emergency room, and the health impacts of environmental factors at the earliest stages of human life were a few of the topics explored at the annual Hackensack Meridian Health Research Institute (HMHRI) Research Symposium on May 29.

More than 200 attended the fourth-annual event, held at the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine (HMSOM), and viewed virtually across the Hackensack Meridian Health network.

“This symposium was the best yet,” said Ihor Sawczuk, M.D., FACS, the president of Academics, Research, and Innovation at the health network, who offered the opening remarks. “We had relevant and exciting topics, and the dialogue was enlightening. This is how we make connections, and develop new ideas and innovations across the breadth of our operation.”

[Read more](#)



We've been named one of America's Most Innovative Companies by Fortune.

Hackensack Meridian Health formed in 2016, bringing together world-class care and research from across New Jersey. The Hackensack Meridian Health Research Institute was created in 2022 to centralize all the lines of scientific inquiry from across the entire health network spanning 18 hospitals and more than 500 patient care locations, among other sites. The HMHRI operates a connected academic and research ecosystem across Hackensack Meridian Health which is focused on developing novel translational therapies for a wide range of health conditions: solid and liquid cancers, diabetes, dementia, auto-immune disorders, infectious disease.

Other focused inquiry is on cardiovascular, neuroscience, children's disorders, behavioral medicine, geriatrics, population health, musculoskeletal, integrative and rehabilitation medicine, women's and men's health, precision medicine, genomics, digital transformation services, artificial intelligence, and quality topics.

[Read more](#)

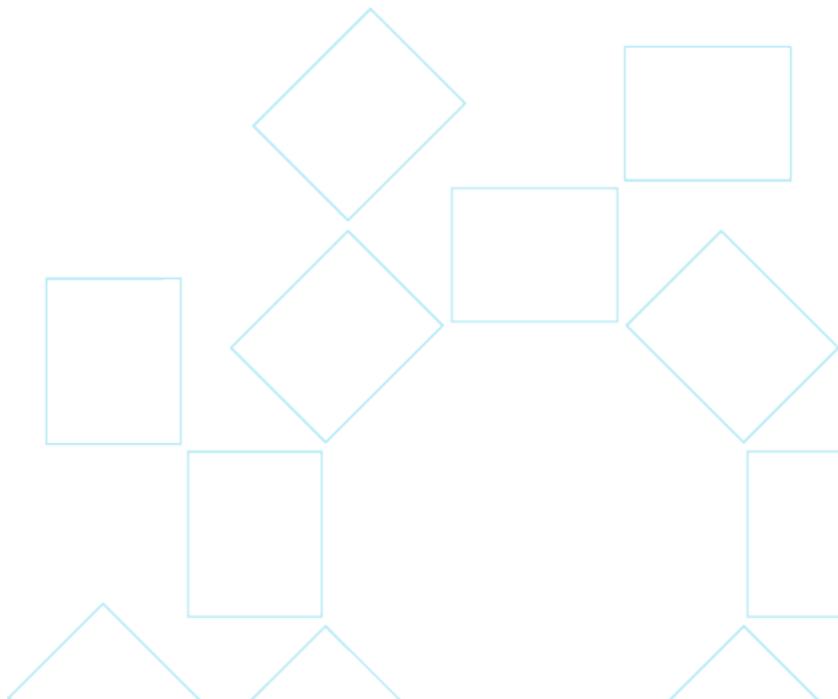
Hackensack Meridian Health Named One of Fortune's Most Innovative Companies

Hackensack Meridian Health, New Jersey's largest and most comprehensive health network, has been included in the Fortune list of "America's Most Innovative Companies."

The health network was named to the list for the second year in a row. It is among a select group of health systems among all industries nationwide to be recognized.

"We are constantly striving to do things better, for our patients," said Robert C. Garrett, FACHE, the chief executive officer of Hackensack Meridian Health. "Our world-class physicians, researchers, scientists, nurses and experts from so many fields continually make us better. In this environment, we are all working in the same direction for the health of all. This is the way we keep challenging ourselves to improve."

"Innovation is what drives outcomes - now and into the future" added Ihor Sawczuk, M.D., FACS, Hackensack Meridian Health's president of Academics, Research and Innovation, founding chair of the Hackensack Meridian Health Research Institute (HMHRI), and associate dean of Clinical Integration and professor and chair emeritus of Urology at the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine.





Hackensack Meridian Health Team Members Develop Winning Ideas Aimed at Reducing Readmissions

Three concepts from Hackensack Meridian Health team members have been selected as winners for the Bear's Den Changemaker Innovation Challenge: Readmission Reduction - and could have tremendous benefits to New Jersey patients in the very near future.

The three winners were picked from dozens of innovative concepts across the health network. A panel of evaluators, including CEO Robert C. Garrett, FACHE, Hackensack Meridian Health senior executives, Hackensack Meridian Health board members, and outside investors, heard all three finalist presentations - and ultimately decided all of the ideas deserved to win. The three concepts will be further developed and piloted at Hackensack Meridian Health locations to determine their effectiveness in reducing readmissions.

"This annual challenge is a terrific way to leverage our tremendous talent from among tens of thousands of team members," said Garrett, the CEO. "When we all work together and find new intelligent ways of doing things, we all keep getting better."

The Bear's Den Innovation Program is a unique accelerator at Hackensack Meridian Health enlisting a panel of experts to evaluate inspirational health care ideas, inventions, and strategies from entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, health care partners, and Hackensack Meridian Health's own team members. The Bear's Den helps make great concepts a reality through strategic partnerships, funding, and other support, and its quarterly meetings are thought-provoking dialogues challenging the status quo to set better health care standards in New Jersey - and beyond.

"We love to see the ideas that come out of the Bear's Den challenges, because they always identify and address pressing health challenges," said Ihor Sawczuk, M.D., FACS, Hackensack Meridian Health's president of Academics, Research and Innovation, founding chair of the Hackensack Meridian Health Research Institute, and also associate dean of Clinical Integration and professor and chair emeritus of Urology at the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine.

The three winners are:

- **New Protocol for Rapid Evaluation and EEG Testing of Patients with Seizures in the Emergency Department (REESE)** – A point-of-care electroencephalogram (EEG) device that allows for quicker diagnosis and monitoring of neurological conditions, helping to discharge patients faster and prevent readmissions. This project is led by Arun Antony, M.D., a neurologist at Jersey Shore University Medical Center.
- **Reducing Readmissions Through a Patient-Friendly Discharge Handout** – A colorful, personalized pamphlet to simplify follow up and medication instructions for older patients, aimed at reducing confusion and preventing readmissions. Patricia Bonatakis, an acute-care physical therapist at Jersey Shore University Medical Center, presented the idea.
- **After Visit Summary Translated Materials** – A solution to provide medication instructions in multiple languages on discharge summaries, improving compliance and reducing errors for non-English speaking patients. This innovation was devised by Thais Wilson, patient care technician, and Samantha Huebner, RN, of Ocean University Medical Center.

These ideas will be implemented as either network-wide changes, or in pilot programs to test their effectiveness.

"These ideas were produced organically, from real-world clinical experience," said Sandra Powell-Elliott, vice president and chief innovation and commercialization officer at Hackensack Meridian Health. "We think that will make all the difference as they are implemented in common-sense ways."

Launched in 2017, the Bear's Den features a panel of experts, including Hackensack Meridian Health CEO Garrett, leading physicians, key network executives, venture capitalists, patent attorneys, who gather regularly to vet proposals from entrepreneurs. The health network's novel incubator has vetted many products and strategies to streamline care delivery, reduce infections, lower hospital readmissions and help patients partner in their care with physicians. The program has also invested in promising innovative companies.

[Read more](#)

NBME Taps Kountz to Serve Additional Term

One of Hackensack Meridian Health's most visible leaders will get the opportunity to serve an additional term on the Council of the National Board of Medical Examiners.

David Kountz, M.D., MBA, MACP, was recommended by the Governance and Nominating Committee of the NBME to be elected to serve an additional 2-year term on the NBME Council, starting March 2025. The Board of Directors approved this recommendation at its most recent meeting.

Hackensack Meridian Health and Stevens Host Webinar to Further Scientific Innovation

Hackensack Meridian Health and the Stevens Institute of Technology have collaborated on research and innovation since 2012. This collaboration has led to discoveries that perfectly match HMH's health-care experience with Stevens' engineering expertise closely related to healthcare. Both institutions are looking to foster, and expand, further breakthroughs into the future.

The two institutions held a research webinar on February 27 to reconnect experts and open the doors to further collaboration projects. Selected Stevens experts presented their specialties and capacities.

Much interest and enthusiasm greeted the potential for the two sides to expand their collaborative work together in four "clusters": Bioinformatics; Rehabilitation Engineering and Medical Robotics; Medical Imaging and Signal Processing; and Chronic Care Delivery Systems.

To facilitate collaborations, please fill out [the REDCap survey here](#)

Hackensack Meridian Health Nurse-Scientist Studies the Impacts of Psychological Safety and Safety Climate Perceptions on Infection Prevention and Safety Practices

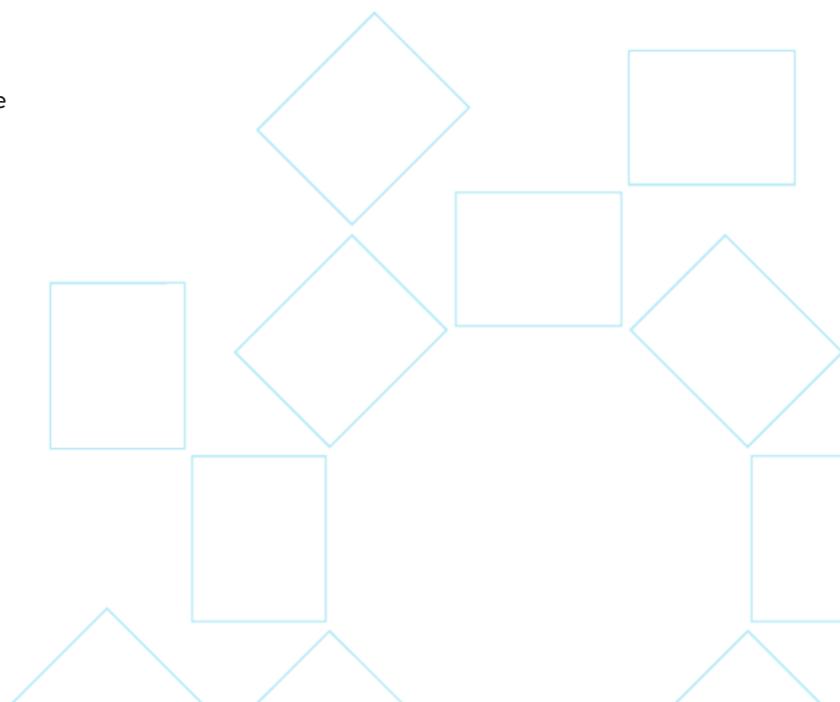
Amanda J. Hessels, Ph.D., MPH, RN, CIC, FAPIC, FAAN, nurse-scientist at the Ann May Center for Nursing, collaborated with researchers from New York and North Carolina in her study of relationships among infection prevention practices, the care environment, psychological safety, and safety climate in adult medical surgical units following the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the researchers' article, titled "Influence of Psychological Safety and Safety Climate Perceptions of Nurses' Infection Prevention and Occupational Safety Practices and Environment," published in *Nursing Reports*, they discuss how patient safety culture is essential to the promotion and preservation of health care quality in the United States. According to the piece, patient safety culture encompasses two primary components: psychological safety and the safety climate of clinical team members. Psychological safety refers to the willingness of team members to express concerns or ask questions while the safety climate refers to team member perception of organizational policies and procedures related to safety.

Both the psychological safety of nurses and safety climate for nurses were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to equipment shortages, increased working hours, and staffing shortages. The researchers examined the long term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on nurse psychological safety and safety climate through the provision of surveys to acute care nurses from 2 major metropolitan medical centers. Four primary domains were assessed through the survey: (1) patient safety climate; (2) psychological safety; (3) self-reported infection prevention and occupational safety behaviors; and (4) the unit infection prevention and occupational safety environment.

Dr. Hessels and her collaborators found that nurse perception of psychological safety was the lowest rated of all survey domains and that nursing leadership plays a crucial role in the perception of psychological safety, safety climate, and subsequent infection prevention efforts. The authors argued that both nursing leaders and organizations could benefit from a shift to a more responsive approach to changing working conditions that minimizes hazards and protects workers, especially during times of crisis. Moving forward, these measures could increase perceptions of psychological safety and perceptions of a safety climate essential for effective infection prevention and safety practices.

For more information, Dr. Hessel's publication can be accessed [here](#).





\$1 Million Gift Will Advance Virtual Patient Platform to Train Future Physicians at HMSOM

The Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine is proud to announce a \$1 million commitment from COTU and its co-founders — Zachary Smith, chief executive officer, and Michael Crisafulli, chief operating officer, to launch a cutting-edge virtual patient platform powered by machine learning (ML) and mixed reality (MR). This visionary gift will fund the development of an innovative dual-platform curriculum designed to prepare the next generation of physicians for leadership in data-driven and technology-enabled health care systems.

“Hackensack Meridian *Health* is committed to embracing AI and other technology to help us build the health system of the future,” said Robert C. Garrett, FACHE, CEO, Hackensack Meridian *Health*. “Through these groundbreaking advances, we will elevate the delivery of care, ensuring that every patient receives the best possible experience and that every one of our clinicians, nurses and other team members are empowered to provide it.”

“Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine is committed to redefining medical education by embracing new technologies, fostering equity and prioritizing patient-centered care, and the health care landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, especially as it relates to machine learning and technology,” said Jeffrey Boscamp, M.D., president and dean, Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine. “Thanks to this most generous gift from Zachary Smith, our students will not only study medicine, but they will help shape the future of it and become even better-prepared physicians who are truly equipped to improve patient outcomes and lead with compassion and technological fluency.”

Building on the success of the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine’s Health Care Strategy elective— created by Mohammed Quadri, M.D., MBA, vice president of Strategy for Academics, Research & Innovation at Hackensack Meridian *Health*— this new ML-driven platform will further enhance students’ hands-on learning. In collaboration with Sameer Sethi, senior vice president, chief AI and insights officer at Hackensack Meridian *Health*, Dr. Quadri will lead the design of advanced virtual patient experiences, ensuring future physicians gain critical skills in data-driven care and technology integration. [Read more](#)

Hackensack Meridian Health Research Projects Awarded \$1.1 Million by NJHF

Hackensack Meridian *Health* has been awarded 25 grants totaling more than \$1.1 million from the New Jersey Health Foundation (NJHF) for important research and community health projects.

The grants support work across the state’s largest and most comprehensive health network, spanning not only the Hackensack Meridian *Health* Research Institute (HMHRI) and clinical and basic research, but also the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine (HMSOM), and a multitude of sites across the Garden State.

“This remarkable level of funding from the New Jersey Health Foundation underscores the innovative and impactful research being conducted across our network,” said Robert C. Garrett, FACHE, CEO of Hackensack Meridian *Health*. “These grants will fuel critical advancements in patient care and contribute to a healthier future for the communities we serve.”

Among the areas supported by the grants: cancer, infectious disease, community health, artificial intelligence, education, sleep, and immunology, among other topics.

The amount for Hackensack Meridian *Health* and the Hackensack Meridian *Health* Research Institute increased from 22 grants and \$915,202 last year, and 16 grants totaling \$486,876 the year before that.

“We value our great partnership with the New Jersey Health Foundation,” said Ihor Sawczuk, M.D., FACS, the president of Academics, Research and Innovation for Hackensack Meridian *Health*, and the founding chair of the Hackensack Meridian *Health* Research Institute. “Our outstanding work is made possible with their help.”

[Read more](#)

Hackensack Meridian Health Resident/Fellow Research Day Features Innovative Research Projects and an Inspiring Keynote Address

Resident/Fellow Research Day, an annual event that provides opportunities for residents and fellows affiliated with Hackensack Meridian Health to present original research studies and vignettes to the academic and professional communities, took place on May 22, 2025.

Opening remarks were delivered by: David Kountz, MD., MBA, MACP, the network's chief academic officer; and Ihor Sawczuk, M.D., FACP, president of Academics, Research and Innovation. Dr. Kountz spoke about the Resident Fellow Research Day program and how it has evolved over the many years that it has been in existence, and Dr. Sawczuk shared some of the significant research accomplishments originating from Hackensack Meridian Health in the last few years. He also discussed the research community's resilience in staying on track with research funding, despite some of the changing tides on a federal level.

Three oral presentations were delivered by residents selected in advance based on their strong poster scores. The presentation topics included a comparison of the incidence and risk factors for infective endocarditis following two different replacement procedures, a review of data demonstrating the impact of delayed chemotherapy initiation in adult acute lymphoblastic leukemia, and a publication analysis of the role of spirituality and religiosity in suicidal risk assessment in adolescents.

The oral presentations were followed by a series of 5-minute poster presentations in various breakout rooms. Attendees could join the breakout rooms that included posters about which they were most interested.

The day culminated with the keynote address, which was presented by Judy Aschner, M.D., director and member scientist at the Hackensack Meridian Center for Discovery and Innovation (CDI) and professor at the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine. Dr. Aschner's presentation was titled "Pursue Your Professional Passion," and she shared invaluable insights gleaned from a long successful career. She also incorporated personal experiences that led her to where she is today.

Resident/Fellow Research Day 2025 ended as Dr. Kountz announced the poster and presentation awardees (the spirituality presentation was the overall winner) and delivered closing remarks. He congratulated the poster submitters and presenters on their excellent contributions to the day and let the audience know that he was going to take a month off before gearing up for Resident Fellow Research Day 2026.

Doppalapudi Receives UCF-Gold Humanism Award

Krishna Doppalapudi, M.D., of Hackensack University Medical Center, received the UCF-Gold Humanism in Medicine Award for Urology residency and fellowship programs.

It is the pilot program year for the award.

Of the select number of distinguished programs that were invited to participate, only 5 programs in the country were chosen, including Hackensack University Medical Center. A total of three awardees were selected for this inaugural year.

Dr. Doppalapudi was recognized at the UCF banquet April 26, at the AUA Annual Meeting.

Cervical Cancer Research Benefits from the 14th Annual Susan Zabransky Hughes Memorial 5K Run/Walk

Hackensack Meridian Hackensack University Medical Center Foundation, part of Hackensack Meridian Health Foundation, is pleased to announce its 14th Annual Susan Zabransky Hughes Memorial 5K Run/Walk. The race was run on April 26, starting at Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Saddle River.

Funds raised from the race will benefit cervical cancer research taking place at Hackensack Meridian Center for Discovery and Innovation (CDI), an advanced research institution founded by Hackensack Meridian Health to rapidly translate innovations in science to improve human health. The CDI's cervical cancer research program, led by Olivier Loudig, Ph.D., an associate member of the CDI, is dedicated to the development of new diagnostic technologies for early detection and improved treatment for women with cervical cancers.

The race, named in honor of Susan Zabransky Hughes, engages many members of the community from Saddle River and surrounding towns. Zabransky Hughes, who was 46 when she passed, was a beloved borough resident who died of cervical cancer in 2011.

[Read more](#)



Kofi Boakye Opoku, resident in Internal Medicine at JFK-Raritan Bay Medical Center, part of Hackensack Meridian Health, recently completed a research rotation at the CDI, contributing to a critical public health initiative. As part of his research project under the guidance of David Perlin, Ph.D., and Barry Kreiswirth, Ph.D., Opoku helped establish in-house capabilities for tracking avian influenza (Bird Flu) within the HMH network. His work not only focused on detecting specific flu subtypes but also on identifying drug-resistance markers and transmission mutations, enhancing the health system's preparedness against emerging viral threats.

Internal Medicine Resident Advances Bird Flu Surveillance at the CDI

The Residency Research Rotation program, conceived by CDI's Chief Operating Officer, Ms. Alla Rabinovich, and Dr. Mayer Ezer, program director of Internal Medicine at Raritan Bay Medical Center, offers residents an immersive, mentored experience in translational research. This elective enables participants to collaborate with CDI faculty and fellows, gaining hands-on exposure to cutting-edge scientific investigations across multiple disciplines. Designed to cultivate research proficiency and deepen scientific understanding, the program encourages residents to extend their projects beyond the rotation, contributing to scientific publications and presentations.



The CDI has been a proud partner of the Gates Foundation and the TB Drug Accelerator (TBDA) in the fight to eradicate tuberculosis (TB) globally.

Sarathy New Representative of TBDA

The consortium has benefited tremendously from years of excellent leadership from [Veronique Dartois](#), who served as CDI's representative since 2019.

Effective Spring 2025, Jansy Sarathy, Ph.D., succeeds Dr. Dartois as member representative to the TBDA.

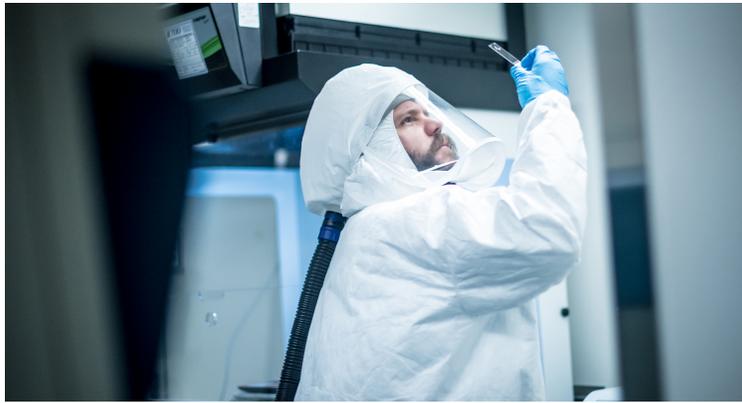
Dr. Sarathy brings with her over 17 years of experience in the field of TB-drug discovery, with a focus on characterizing drug distribution and potency in hard-to-treat sites of infection in the host. As a member of the TBDA, the CDI remains on the forefront of global efforts to develop affordable, shorter, safer TB drug regimens.

Congratulations to Dr. Sarathy - and we eagerly anticipate the future breakthroughs. [Read more](#)

“Bring Your Kids to Work Day” 2025 Brings Lots of Learning

Every year it's a treat to share science with the children of our greater CDI and HMHRI family. Bring Your Kids to Work Day on April 24 was a morning full of fun and learning. Crafts and experiments and hands-on activities - plus pizza and ice cream! - were made possible by Dr. Perlin, Dr. Kreiswirth, Dr. Murugan, Dr. Gourni Paleoudis, and Dr. Sawczuk. We applaud them and all the budding scientists among us. [Read more](#)





RESEARCH UPDATES & EVENTS

SPRING 2025

Issues Accessing eResearch or CITI Modules not loading?

Email huron_useraccount@hmn.org for all your eResearch issues related to user access and CITI modules not appearing.

Research Compliance Audit and Monitoring Program (RCAMP) Resources, SOPs, and Requests

RCAMP is a resource for Hackensack Meridian Health researchers. RCAMP auditors work hand-in-hand with teams to identify areas of improvement and development of resources to support research activities. To request an RCAMP review, submit a request through the [Google Request form](#). Review the resources available on [RCAMP's website](#).

Last summer, RCAMP updated its [Standard Operating Procedures \(SOPs\)](#) for how research reviews are conducted and scored at Hackensack Meridian Health. These updates ensure **consistency and transparency** in RCAMP's review process.

Observation Classifications

RCAMP categorizes observations made during reviews into three levels:

- **Critical Observation:** A significant violation of regulations or Hackensack Meridian Health policies that severely impacts study data integrity (e.g., ability to assess intervention effectiveness or toxicity) or the safety/rights of study subjects. This also includes a pattern of similar major and minor observations indicating potential systemic non-compliance. Any critical observation results in an "Unsatisfactory Rating."
- **Major Observation:** A circumstance, practice, or process that questions the study's overall integrity. This includes violations of regulations or Hackensack Meridian Health policies with the potential to significantly impact study data integrity or subject safety/rights. A cumulative pattern of similar minor observations indicating possible systemic non-compliance can also be deemed major.
- **Minor Observation:** A deviation from regulations, Hackensack Meridian Health policies, or best practices that does not significantly impact the study's outcome, interpretation, data integrity, or the safety/rights of study subjects. It's less severe than a critical or major observation. Even a minor observation can result in an FDA or sponsor finding during a third-party audit.

Overall Report Ratings

Final reports receive an overall score based on observations, which helps evaluate compliance and the successful implementation of Corrective and Preventive Action (CAPA) plans.

- **Satisfactory:** The reviewed scope adheres to best practices, applicable regulations, and Hackensack Meridian Health policies. Risks are managed according to Hackensack Meridian Health, clinical, and study expectations. Any identified deficiencies in security, operations, finance, or management are not expected to impact the study's integrity, research subjects, Hackensack Meridian Health business, or reputation.
- **Needs Improvement:** The management of risks and quality assurance measures requires improvement to meet Hackensack Meridian Health, clinical, or study requirements. Identified deficiencies in security, operations, finance, or management could negatively impact the study's integrity, research subjects, Hackensack Meridian Health business, or reputation if not corrected.
- **Unsatisfactory:** Indicates an urgent need for management intervention and resource focus to mitigate identified deficiencies, ensuring study integrity and research subject safety. This rating is given when numerous and diverse major observations pose immediate risk to the institution, study integrity, and subjects, or when a critical observation is identified, requiring immediate mitigation including institutional reporting and potential study pause or termination.

Clinical Trials Day 2025: Commemorating Critical Scientific Steps on May 20

Hackensack Meridian Health marked Clinical Trials Day on May 20 with some reflection - and a bit of celebration at sites around our network.

Clinical Trials Day is celebrated around the world on May 20 to recognize the day that James Lind began what may be considered the first randomized clinical trial. Aboard a ship on this day in 1747, in pursuit of a treatment for scurvy among sailors, the Scottish doctor tested the theory that citrus fruits could cure the deficiency. His work ultimately discovered a cure - and saved untold lives in the ensuing centuries.

Here at Hackensack Meridian Health, there are hundreds of leading-edge clinical trials available to our patients. Throughout the network, scientists are pursuing treatments for diseases that run the gamut from tuberculosis to Parkinson's disease, from epilepsy to coronary artery disease.



Congratulations! You received a new grant - now what?

The Post Award team in the Office of Research Administration was established in 2023 to serve as a resource for research grant awardees. Its purpose is to help researchers manage and track their grants once they have received them.

The Post Award team utilizes the PeopleSoft grants module, which is the Hackensack Meridian *Health* system used to track personnel, salary expenses, and any other allocations for the grant. They also work with the finance department to coordinate spending on the grant and ensure that relevant spending reports are available to the study team.

Early on in the process, the Post Award team is available to educate study teams on working with the purchasing and digital technology services groups for their research needs and on how to charge expenses towards the grant. Throughout the grant life cycle, the office serves as a liaison between the principal investigators, the Foundation, the finance team, and the Office of Sponsored Programs.

The Post Award team is introduced to the study teams via the Office of Sponsored Programs, led by David Candelmo. David and his team are often the initial points of contact for individuals interested in grants, as they help identify relevant grants and navigate researchers through the submission process.

Researchers may also reach out to the post-award team on their own by emailing hmhpostaward@hmhn.org. Team members include grant analysts, Irfana Ahmed and Gwendolyn Connell. Post Award services are available to researchers network-wide, though researchers from the Center for Discovery and Innovation have their own internal team for their grant processes.

Reminder of Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan

The Office of Research Administration would like to remind the research community that an Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan can be found in section 25.11 of the Human Research Protection Program SOPs. The SOPs are available on the [Office of Research Administration website](#) and the [eResearch portal](#). The circumstances covered include how the Office of Research Administration will handle communication during emergencies, what to do in cases of loss of power or weather-related emergencies, information surrounding IRB records access during emergencies, guidelines for research priorities during emergency situations, and more.

Please contact ora@hmhn.org or hmhirb@hmhn.org with any questions related to the plan.

Educational Events Coming Soon

In addition to looking forward to your upcoming summer vacations, there are also plenty of research education events that you have to look forward to. The Office of Research Administration has sessions on a range of topics planned for late June and into the fall. These include several new Biostatistics Education Series presentations addressing concepts such as study design, data requests, and diagnostic testing. Additionally, a two-part series regarding Medicare Analysis will run in September.

A Data 'Miniseries' will kick off on June 24. In collaboration with the Digital Technology Services (DTS) team, the Office of Research Administration, and Corporate Compliance, this series will begin with a presentation on how to request data - from start to finish. Dr. Ben Schleich, Principal Analytics for the DTS will begin with an overview of the Research Data Platform and then continue to walk attendees through the whole process of obtaining the full data sets. The series will then continue with an overview of regulatory considerations for research with medical records which will provide insight into data use as it relates to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), contracts, and compliance. The Data Miniseries will conclude with a presentation on data analytics and biostatistical considerations for procured data.

Finally, a September Investigator Training Lecture Series event will feature a topic relevant to all researchers: how to conduct a literature review. Christopher Duffy, Associate Dean, VP, Medical Library Services, and Margaret Dreker, Health Sciences Librarian, from the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine will provide guidance on how to identify relevant articles for your work.

As a reminder, the quarterly orientation for staff members continues to be offered on an ongoing basis. It is mandatory for research staff, but it is available for anyone to join — for the first time or as a refresher. We are also still offering a 1:1 orientation for principal investigators; they can register for a session at any time. More information about the orientation programs and about other educational opportunities is available [here](#).



FEATURED RESEARCHER

SPRING 2025

The CDI Experts: Fridman, Advocate for Health Communication, Aims to Empower Patients Through Digital Interventions

Ilona Fridman, Ph.D, has seen first-hand the struggle patients often go through in getting the correct information after they get a frightening diagnosis. The passion to empower patients with proper knowledge so they can map out their health journey is at the heart of the newly-established Advanced Communication and Decision-Making Center Lab at the Hackensack Meridian Center for Discovery and Innovation (CDI). Up and running since July, the lab is already making tremendous strides in providing research on how providers can build better relationships with and give comfort to their patients through effective communication.

Dr. Fridman believes health outcomes are driven by knowledge and informed decisions about diseases, treatments, and cures. Communication with patients is key to optimize all aspects of this equation.

Dr. Fridman, an expert facilitator in health communication, is dedicated to enhancing patient outcomes by harnessing emerging technologies and designing innovative interventions for health communication and decision-making.

“Dr. Fridman is a terrific complement to the outreach and cancer prevention strategies growing at the CDI,” said David Perlin, Ph.D., chief scientific officer and executive vice president, of the CDI.

“Her work fits in well with other world-class researchers at the Cancer Prevention Precision Control Institute (CPPCI),” added Lisa Carter-Bawa, Ph.D., MPH, APRN, ANP-C, FAAN, from the Hackensack Meridian Center for Discovery and Innovation (CDI), director of the CPPCI and professor of medicine at the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine

Path To Health Communication and Medicine

Dr. Fridman traces her passion for communication and decision-making back to her early career in Russia. After earning her undergraduate degree, she worked in a multinational corporation, where she designed effective communication strategies for clients and partners. This experience deepened her appreciation for the power of information.



Later, as a co-leader of a start-up developing digital decision support tools, she explored how communication impacts decision-making.

“Teaching managers to discuss product pros and cons with client preferences showed me the benefits of informed choices for long-lasting relationships,” she explains, highlighting the improved client satisfaction and strong partnerships that followed.

Dr. Fridman’s journey has shaped her focus on how individuals evaluate information and what they consider worth acting upon.

After immigrating to the U.S., Dr. Fridman’s experience and knowledge about decision making helped her to secure a full scholarship for a Ph.D. at Columbia University. While studying management with a focus on the psychology of decision-making, she started working with a Palliative Service at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC). This encounter was transformative, as she learned how uninformed decisions in cancer care can profoundly impact lives.

During her time at MSKCC as a graduate student, Fridman tackled the issue of overtreatment in patients with advanced cancer.

[Read more](#)



FEATURED RESEARCHER

Susan H. Weaver, Ph.D., RN, CRNI, NEA-BC

Nurse Scientist
Ann May Center for Nursing

Susan Weaver, Ph.D., RN, CRNI, NEA-BC, is a nurse scientist with a research focus on the nursing workforce, particularly administrative supervisors, licensed practical nurses, and nurses working night shifts. Her research identifies gaps in education for nurses and how they can best collaborate and communicate with each other. This is critical work, as nurses are responsible for patient care on a 24 hour, seven day a week basis. However, Dr. Weaver does not stop at research; she also recognizes the importance of taking action to address any gaps. Over the course of her career, she has become a member of nearly a dozen nursing organizations and associations. She has leveraged those affiliations to strengthen her research and to advocate for nurses.

Dr. Weaver shared with us how she became involved in research years into a highly successful clinical career, some of the interesting projects that she has pursued since, and some advice for nurses who might be curious about the research realm.

How did you decide to become a nurse?

I have always wanted to be a nurse. My mother was an emergency room nurse, so she likely influenced my decision. I actually recently found a picture of my 5-year-old self playing nurse with my sister. I have loved my career as a nurse and have never looked back.

What led you to pursue research? Why did you choose to get a Ph.D. after more than two decades of clinical experience?

I started my career as a surgical nurse, then spent 5 years as a nurse in the intensive care unit (ICU), and later worked as an ICU educator. When I had my children, I opted for an evening supervisor role because it fit into my schedule, and spent most of my career as an administrative supervisor. In that position, I spent most of my time “taking care” of the nursing staff rather than just the patients.

Throughout the years, I wondered about the research process. I was tired of reading the beginnings and ends of articles and not understanding the middle parts. When my youngest son started high school, I decided to pursue my Ph.D. It was a great experience, and I’ve been at Hackensack Meridian Health since my graduation



Can you share some of your earlier research and how it led to your work today?

It’s been a great journey doing research on the nursing workforce. For my Ph.D., I was interested in researching the administrative supervisor role. . At the time, my dissertation committee was a little wary, since they were used to seeing research related to patients rather than nurses themselves. But I demonstrated the gap in the research by showing them the paucity of studies in this area. Ultimately, they were convinced and supported the study. I identified the role responsibilities of administrative supervisors and also found a disconnect between night shift administrative supervisors and the daytime leadership team. After my dissertation, I investigated collaboration between night shift administrative supervisors and daytime nurse managers. After the quantitative study, I conducted a qualitative study, for which I spoke to the night supervisors and daytime managers. I identified themes in my discussions with them and sought potential solutions for their struggles to collaborate and communicate, such as designing more structured collaboration initiatives.

Another finding from my dissertation was that administrative supervisors lacked role-specific education. I felt that it was important to take action to address that as well. Starting in 2017, I held annual conferences for administrative supervisors. These conferences were initially held at Hackensack Meridian Health, but I was able to transition and continue to lead this conference at a state-wide nursing organization. This fall we will be holding our eighth conference, and administrative supervisors typically attend from up and down the east coast.

This area is so critical because the administrative supervisors are generally the only nurse leaders present at night. They are the ones that address the myriad of problems that might occur at night. With often less staff at night, the administrative supervisor role is even more essential.

Night shift administrative supervisors work against their circadian rhythms, which led to my work on fatigue in nurses. I conducted a qualitative systematic review to look at the experiences of nurses working night shifts and it became clear that there are many hazards to working those hours. I conducted a study exploring fatigue levels in daytime and nighttime nurses by utilizing the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) and learned that both daytime and nighttime nurses experience sleepiness (although the issue was most significant with the night nurses). To address this, I advocated for ways to mitigate this problem. For example, when possible, nurses are no longer required to stay after their night shifts to complete learning or other institutional requirements. It's a challenging area to address, but I'm working on it.

What advice would you give to nurses who have a research idea that they might be interested in pursuing?

We are fortunate that at Hackensack Meridian Health, we have a nursing research council at each hospital, along with eight nurse scientists. A nurse who is interested in research might want to attend a nursing research council meeting or even reach out to one of our nurse scientists. It's always a great idea to collaborate with others when starting out and even later on. Another option is to attend a journal club. The New Knowledge and Innovation Council conducts nursing journal clubs quarterly, and nurses present studies that they themselves have published. Everyone in attendance can offer suggestions or ideas, and I love when nurses who don't have research experience attend. They often have good observations to contribute, regardless of whether they are familiar with research.

What do you find most gratifying about your role?

When I conduct my own research, I find it most gratifying when administrative supervisors email me from throughout the country with questions about my research. I really enjoy engaging with fellow nurses who have similar interests. I also find it gratifying when I get great response rates to my surveys. For a recent study, I received 111 responses from administrative supervisors working in 15 states. Finally, I enjoy sharing my work by presenting for nursing organizations. I presented for the American Organization for Nursing Leadership at a conference in Boston, and it was standing room only. These types of presentations on the administrative supervisor role in nursing are clearly needed, and people are hungry for information.

It's also rewarding working with nurses at Hackensack Meridian Health. Some of the nurses that I've mentored have gone on to complete Doctor of Nursing Practice degrees and have spearheaded their own projects. Others have found other ways to get involved in research.

I've also found it very enriching to be involved in professional nursing organizations. They have allowed me to partner with researchers from throughout the country. It is a great way to keep current. And lastly, I've enjoyed serving on the Institutional Review Board here and also attending the educational programming available to the research community through the Office of Research Administration.

What are some extraprofessional activities or hobbies that you enjoy?

I like to exercise. I go to the gym and enjoy rowing, spinning, and yoga classes. In summertime, true to my name, I like to weave baskets. I weave on my deck by the beach and gift friends and family with melon baskets.



FEATURED RESEARCH ADMINISTRATOR

SPRING 2025

Sean Fitzgerald, MPH, RBP Director of Research and Academic Safety

Sean Fitzgerald's role requires an exacting attention to detail, an unflappability in the face of uncertainty, and an ability to problem solve. He is the Biosafety Officer and Director of Research and Academic Safety for the Hackensack Meridian Health network. It is his responsibility to identify, assess, and control occupational health risks associated with exposure to biohazardous agents and materials and to develop programs to manage these risks. The role requires tremendous vigilance and agility, as Sean oversees both the clinical aspects of the network activities and the research programs. The latter includes a slew of studies involving different agents, ranging from CAR T cells to infectious diseases with high-level containment areas. He also led the clinical and research communities through the COVID-19 pandemic, an experience that he considers unparalleled, despite his years spent in this field. While his job can be demanding, Sean's exceptional qualifications and background, his visionary leadership approach, and his dedication to compliance inspire confidence.

He sat down with one of the Research Roundup editors to share how he arrived at the position he has today, to offer biosafety advice for researchers, and to discuss his experience at Hackensack Meridian Health in the context of the tremendous growth in research over the last few years.

What led to your current role as a biosafety officer?

Originally, I wanted to be a wildlife ecologist. After college, I planned on working at the Bronx Zoo while pursuing a Ph.D. part time. However, I wasn't able to move ahead with that plan, since living in the New York City area on a Bronx Zoo salary seemed unfeasible. Instead, I pivoted and began working in research at Harvard. As the grant for that role became depleted, I decided to move towards a compliance-based career that offered stability.

Can you share some biosafety-related tips for the research community?

The core tenet of biosafety is risk assessment. It is critical that researchers take the time to assess potential problems, risks, and vulnerabilities, and determine what can be done to mitigate them. Once they proceed with their courses of action, they need to consistently evaluate and re-evaluate their effectiveness. They need to understand potential biosafety issues with the research they're doing and not just blaze down a path at 90 mph. Researchers' studies might have unintended effects and certain risks associated with them that need to be considered and managed. Investigators should pay attention and not lose sight of things in the expediency of trying to get results.

What are your suggestions for the average clinician to ensure he is conducting his research safely and in compliance?

I serve as a subject matter expert for other institutions, so my advice stems from my observations of clinical research in various settings, not just at HMH. What I've seen is that in pursuit of finding a better treatment, clinicians don't always do the risk assessments that they should. This is especially the case with researchers conducting secondary or tertiary trials. Those individuals often think everything is being taken care of and will sometimes escalate doses without the proper precautions. But as I just mentioned, there can be effects that they might have not even considered. Physician-scientists sometimes forget that this is research, not a finished product.

As Hackensack Meridian Health's research programs have grown, how has the biosafety landscape here evolved?

The biosafety landscape has grown accordingly. The research growth has been very significant, so we've worked to meet those needs. To give you a sense of what has changed in terms of clinical research, when I joined HMH in 2018, there were two trials for genetically modified clinical treatments; there are now well over 50. With respect to pre-clinical research, when I joined, there was one laboratory, and there are now over 30. I believe that I had a big advantage in starting here during the earlier years because I was able to promote a culture of safety from the ground up. The research population wants to do things right and to act safely and compliantly. I also make a point of trying to make our processes as streamlined and straightforward as possible. I don't want to make safety an impediment, just a way of practice.

Are there any current biosafety challenges that present as a greater threat today in clinical research settings than they have in the past?

Biological technology is evolving at a rapid pace. Researchers need to be cognizant of all the potential positives and negatives. Before deciding to pursue new avenues, researchers must think through all the processes involved. While some cutting edge technologies can be incredibly beneficial, they need to be approached carefully and deliberately at all times.

You have worked at some renowned institutions, including Harvard University and Harvard Medical School. What has been unique about working at Hackensack Meridian Health's?

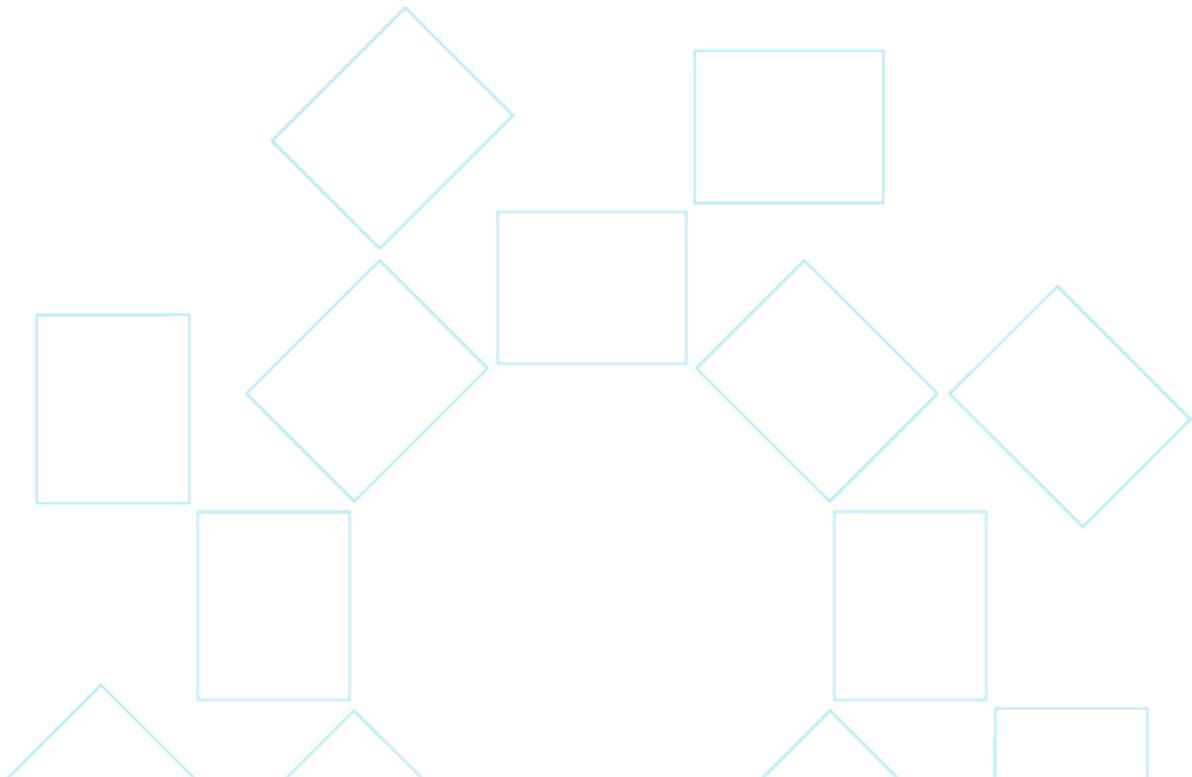
The previous places I worked were long established. During my time at Harvard, it was mostly refining and solving existing issues. What was great about coming to Hackensack Meridian Health was that it was a new position so I could start from scratch. I was able to build my own processes and procedures and tweak them as necessary.

What do you love most about what you do?

I love the ever-changing challenges. Science is constantly evolving, so safety and compliance need to evolve as well. No two days are the same for me, which makes things exciting and fun.

Do you have any extra-professional interests or hobbies?

I enjoy traveling, Boston sports, and Star Wars. I also volunteer for [501st Legion](#), which is an organization that creates Star Wars-related costumes for community appearances. These include visits to local charitable and volunteer events at libraries, community centers, and other locations. Any donations for appearances also go towards charities.





ACADEMICS BULLETIN

SPRING 2025

The Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine (HMSOM) fourth annual Medical Student Research Day showed the curiosity and spirit of medical students who aim to improve lives long into the future.

The on-campus event on May 2 brought together more than 180 abstracts on a wide variety of the most current health topics, two keynote speakers, platform presentations, and poster sessions.

Welcome and introductions were made by Vice Dean Stanley R. Terlecky, Ph.D. and Assistant Dean Zhiyong Han, Ph.D.

The keynote speakers were: Barry Kreiswirth, Ph.D., member scientist of the Hackensack Meridian Center for Discovery and Innovation (CDI) and professor of Medical Sciences at the school; and Michael D. Stifelman, M.D., chair of urology at Hackensack University Medical Center, director of Robotic Surgery at Hackensack Meridian Health, and professor at the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine. Dr. Kreiswirth showed data on his ongoing investigations into the spread of multi-drug resistant *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, while Dr. Stifelman presented on the techniques involved in robotic buccal mucosa ureteroplasties.

Two students gave presentations as well: first-year student Pramath Kalelkar presented a talk entitled, “Patient-derived organoids for pre-treatment screening in colorectal cancer,” while fourth-year student Arun Sangam spoke on “Epigenomic interactions of Runx-1 in Down Syndrome.”

[Read More.](#)



HMSOM Faculty Awards include world-class talent from the CDI

HMSOM recently held its Faculty Awards and Recognitions ceremony in celebration of our exceptional team.

The event honored the remarkable dedication and achievements demonstrated by our faculty throughout the year. The distinguished group includes world-class talent from the [Center for Discovery and Innovation](#): Rachel Rosenstein, M.D., Ph.D., and Barry Kreiswirth, Ph.D.

We extend our sincere congratulations and ongoing gratitude to everyone for their commitment to excellence in medical education and their invaluable contributions to our community. It was inspiring to gather and recognize these outstanding accomplishments together.

[Read More.](#)



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS ROUNDUP

SPRING 2025

Network

Hackensack Meridian *Health* had a successful match and filled all available positions

Resident meal stipends harmonized across the network beginning in the next academic year

A grant to support primary care resident training in caring for the homeless was submitted to the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). The grant represents a collaboration between Hackensack Meridian *Health* Academic Affairs and the Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine

Jennifer Coppola, vice president of Academic Affairs elected as member of GNYHA Working Group

North Region

HUMC Diagnostic Radiology Residency application submitted to ACGME for approval

HUMC Neurology Residency - Initial Accreditation obtained ACGME Clinical Learning Environment Review (CLER) Site Visit on April 8-9 at HUMC

Central Region

JFKUMC Pharmacy Resident Shivankar Vajinepalli, PharmD, earned second place in the Patient Safety Pearls Presentations at New Jersey Society of Health-System Pharmacists Annual Meeting

Subutay Bozkurt, M.D., JFKUMC Neurology Chief, won a Resident Scholarship to the Annual Meeting for the American Academy of Neurology

South Region

JSUMC Anesthesiology Resident, Alyssa Marchiano, M.D., awarded “Best Medically Challenging Case” presentation at the The New Jersey State Society of Anesthesiologists (NJSSA).

Kenneth Kronhaus, M.D. (Associate Program Director, Family Medicine Residency, OUMC) to be installed as President of the New Jersey Academy of Family Physicians in May

Term sheets extended to candidates for Pediatrics Program Director and General Practice Dentistry at JSUMC



QUARTERLY QUESTION

SPRING 2025

**Please name an annual event that features research highlights
from throughout the network**

(hint: it could be an event for medical students, nurses, residents, or others)

To answer the question, please click [here](#).

The first person to submit the correct answer will receive a Hackensack Meridian *Health* gift.