Sudhakar Selvaraj, MD, PhD, is starting a collaboration with faculty at the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and UT Physicians to provide immediate care to those patients who are at high risk for suicide due to COVID-19.

During the pandemic, levels of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and domestic violence have risen due to the uncertainty surrounding us. Job loss and isolation from friends and family have also contributed to the increase.

Starting immediately, the partnership, using a $799,999 grant from the Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is launching a COVID-19 Emergency Response for Suicide initiative. This project will be implemented at UT Physicians' primary care clinics. Patients will be screened for suicide and self-harm and provided immediate and appropriate interventions.

A large network will be put in place for this project. After a patient's initial evaluation, Selvaraj and the team will coordinate immediate treatment steps and appropriate referrals based on the evaluations. These treatments could include counseling, therapy, or other services within the UTHealth system. The group will connect with other specialty groups, including emergency rooms, in the community and may make referrals as necessary.

This patient-centered process is aimed at preventing suicide and mitigating the effects of domestic violence and related issues. The process from evaluation to treatment will be quick, so the treatment can start as soon as possible.

Selvaraj says suicide is preventable if addressed immediately. He and his team strongly encourage anyone who has been struggling during the pandemic to seek help, especially if they have no one else to talk with.
“This is personally a very satisfying project for me,” Selvaraj said. “The project directly impacts the community positively. The treatment is designed to be immediate to help people who are in crisis in our community. I’m very happy that we received this and can start building a program of coordination to help those in need.”

Read more about the project [here](#).

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**Faculty spotlight:**

**Gonzales follows trend of residents becoming faculty**

Omar D. Gonzales, MD, recently accepted an assistant professor faculty position at the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.

Gonzales, who joins the growing list of residents who are transitioning to faculty, has diverse experience in biological and social sciences. In college, he was involved in biological research that studied the reproductive mechanism in an asexual, Pan-American insect. Upon graduation, he became involved with the National College Advising Corps, working to increase college access among high school students in historically under-represented groups. This group brought Gonzales to Houston, where he worked at Sharpstown High School.

Gonzales enjoyed his time working with students, but he was looking to pursue a career that would allow him to explore biological sciences and make a positive social impact. The psychiatry field seemed like the perfect fit for him.

In his residency, Gonzales became interested in patient-centered treatment for severe mental illness. He was interested in a more collaborative approach, taking into account the patient’s values and priorities when treating patients.

His ultimate long-term goal is to be a director for a graduate medical education program. Gonzales uses his passion for working with trainees to learn everything he can about curriculum development.

Like many others, Gonzales credits residency in the department as a boost to getting started as a faculty member.

“It’s been immensely beneficial to me,” Gonzales said. “When I completed my residency training in psychiatry, I decided to stay on with UTHealth Harris County Psychiatric Center because I was proud of the work being done there, and the staff have been more friendly and inviting than anywhere else I have worked.”

In his spare time, Gonzales spends his time reading science fiction and playing tabletop games.

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Hamilton leads UTHealth to participate in worldwide
Jane Hamilton, PhD, MPH, is collaborating with over 200 scientists in 35 countries to coordinate the implementation of the Collaborative Outcomes study on Health and Functioning during Infection Times (COH-FIT) project.

COH-FIT is a large international survey for the entire population of countries affected by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Aiming to collect anonymous information from over 100,000 participants, the online survey is available in 25 languages and has been completed by approximately 88,500 participants in 138 countries to date. Researchers are seeking input from adults, adolescents, and children (aged 6 and older). Everyone is encouraged to take the survey whether directly affected by COVID-19 or not.

The study is being led by Christoph Correll, MD, from Germany and Marco Solmi, MD, PhD from Italy. The project aims to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic over an 18-month period by collecting data to assess the general population’s physical and mental well-being and behaviors, as well as factors in the environment, both prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the time of each of the COH-FIT surveys. The data will enable researchers to identify people who are at higher or lower risk for physical and mental health problems during infection times and during different levels of restrictions, and to identify risk and protective factors that will inform prevention and intervention programs for the COVID-19 pandemic and future events.

The Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences is one of only five institutions that were chosen to coordinate the implementation of this survey in the United States. Hamilton’s goal is to get the survey out as widely as possible and then work with other investigators to analyze the data. Hamilton was chosen by the department to collaborate with the COH-FIT scientists and is excited for the opportunity to take a closer look into community well-being.

“I feel extremely honored that Dr. De Quevedo recommended me,” Hamilton said. “I’m honored that he thought of me and my expertise in public health research.”

To take the survey, visit https://www.coh-fit.com/

Weaver, Heads, and Yamine battle substance use in Innovations Clinic
The Innovations Clinic, a part of the Center for Neurobehavioral Research on Addiction, offers treatment for many different types of addictions, including nicotine, alcohol, illegal substances and misuse of prescription medications.

Led by Michael Weaver, MD; Angela Heads, PhD; Luba Yammine, PhD, the clinic provides an individualized recovery plan designed to meet the specific needs of the patient in a supportive environment. Weaver and Yammine administer medication-assisted treatment (MAT) program while Heads coordinates psychotherapy treatments on site.

Every individual’s case of addiction is unique. When patients come to the Innovations Clinic, they receive a comprehensive medical evaluation where their physical, social, mental health, and substance use history are taken. The staff then works with the patient to develop a plan for initiating treatment, determine whether medication-assisted treatment is appropriate, and create a plan for relapse prevention.

After the initial screening, the patient is either referred to an outside therapist or is scheduled with one in-house at the clinic. The therapist works with the client to develop strategies to manage their addiction. The clinicians work with the patient to schedule follow-up visits based on the individual treatment plan.

The staff says patients using more than one substance is very common. Alcohol and tobacco, as well as opioids, a growing trend in the U.S., are the most prevalent substances abused.

Addiction can be deadly, but it is treatable. Treating addiction saves lives, and there are many long-term success stories from those who have received proper care. Weaver, Heads, and Yammine are passionate about their work and helping others.

“Recovery from addiction is an area of medicine where it is possible to make such a dramatic difference in a patient’s quality of life and possibly save a life by treating the addiction,” Weaver said.

“By providing psychotherapy to help the client identify their own personal warning signs that they may relapse, and developing tools to manage those situations when they arise, they are more likely to be successful,” Heads said.

“My personal goal is to create an individualized treatment plan that is not only evidence-based but that incorporates each patient’s needs and personal goals,” Yammine said.

For more information about the Innovations Clinic or to schedule an appointment, visit
Construction on new hospital continues on schedule

Photos outside UTHealth Continuum of Care Campus for Behavioral Health building. Photo credit (top) Amanda Campos/UTHealth and (bottom) Jair Soares/UTHealth

Construction on the UTHealth Continuum of Care Campus for Behavioral Health is currently on schedule to be completed in early 2022 as planned. This $125 million, 264-bed facility is a joint project between UTHealth and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC).

This newest addition to the Texas Medical Center was made possible by state funding awarded to HHSC by the 2017 Legislative Budget Board and Gov. Greg Abbott, as the state looks to improve overall behavioral health across Texas. Once completed, the UTHealth Continuum of Care Campus will be the largest academic psychiatric hospital in the United States.

Recently, Jair Soares, MD, PhD; Lokesh Shahani, MD, MPH, FACP; and Stephen Glazier, chief operating officer at UTHealth Harris County Psychiatric Center, all attended a milestone event in the construction of the building. The final layer of concrete was poured and smoothed over.

While at the location, Soares, Shahani, and Glazier were able to observe the progress and spoke about the new hospital, focusing on the impact this will have on the community as a whole.

Watch a video of the event here.
Research:
Thomas receives COVID-19 research grant

Tina Thomas, a fourth-year psychiatry resident, has received a one-year, $14,990 grant from the American Psychiatric Association Foundation (APA) Foundation to explore the impact of COVID-19 in relation to psychiatry. Her project was chosen from a number of grant proposals by an award selection committee associated with the APA Foundation.

Thomas' study will investigate the feasibility of using mobile technology to gather data from people who are homeless during COVID-19. She will be looking specifically at exposure, knowledge, attitudes, and practices relating to COVID-19; mental health symptoms; and access to health and social services during the pandemic.

To conduct this study, Thomas plans to give at least 20 participants a mobile phone and administer monthly surveys. Those participating in the study will use the phones to record survey answers and the data will be collected remotely.

Thomas hopes that using mobile phones will be a feasible way to collect data to understand the impact COVID-19 has on those who are homeless. Additionally, by providing phones, she hopes that health and social care will be easier to access for this vulnerable population.

Thomas was inspired to pursue this grant by her research mentor, Jane Hamilton, PhD, MPH, assistant professor at the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, who has a SAMHSA grant to deliver services to people experiencing homelessness through the UT HOMES program. Hamilton found that nearly 70% of her study population had no access to a phone. This significant barrier to care and Thomas' clinical work with Healthcare for the Homeless prompted the development of this grant proposal with Hamilton along with Ronald Acierno, PhD, and Scott Lane, PhD.

This will be a valuable project for Thomas to undertake. She will be able to develop her skills as a primary investigator and researcher. She will gain access to mentorship at both the local and national level. She encourages other residents to apply for these types of grants.

“As a former APA Diversity Leadership Fellow, this grant was open to me and was an excellent opportunity to bring together my clinical and research interests,” Thomas said. “It will also enable me to gain more experience and understanding of an underserved minority population which, I believe, can strengthen my ability to serve this population in the future.”

Registration is now open!
The 2020 Houston Mood Disorders Conference, put on annually by the Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, will be held virtually this year. This conference traditionally draws more than 200 attendees, and we expect an even larger audience for the 2020 edition!

The presenters are from various departments at UTHealth as well as international keynote speakers. Also, local companies as well as those from out of town come to exhibit their products and services to attendees.

This year’s conference is titled “Bipolar Disorder: Advances in Diagnosis and Management.” An in-depth look at various aspects of bipolar disorder and the latest research on treatment, causes, and how to manage will be presented.

We’d like to extend an invitation to join us for the conference from the comfort of your own home. Come be a part of the first ever virtual Mood Disorders Conference. We have great speakers and topics lined up, giving you the latest developments in bipolar disorder.

For registration information, please visit [https://cpd.education.bcm.edu/content/1673](https://cpd.education.bcm.edu/content/1673)

**Congratulations to the 2020 Dean's Teaching Excellence Award recipients**
Take the COVID-19 survey

Please take a few moments to take a survey on how you've been doing during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was put together by Scott Lane, PhD, and Salih Selek, MD, to explore how
the pandemic has affected the UTHealth community's mental health. All results will remain anonymous. To start the survey click here.

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**Clinical trials**

The following clinical trails are also back in operation, following all necessary safety guidelines. If you’re interested, contact the appropriate study.

**Suvorexant to reduce symptoms of nicotine use: A double-blind, placebo-controlled study**  
Contact: 713-500-DRUG (3784)

**Assessment of MRI-Based Markers of Dopaminergic Integrity as a Biological Indicator of Gulf War Illness**  
Contact: Deborah M Little, PhD, 713-486-2524

**The Safety and Efficacy of Psilocybin in Participants with Treatment Resistant Depression**  
Contact: Valeria Cuellar, 713-486-2523

To see all open studies, visit our website.

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**We're hiring!**

The following positions are open at our department:

**Harris Health Clinic – Location: Acres – North East Houston**

**Harris Health Clinic – Location: Baytown – South East Houston**

**Harris Health Clinic – Location: Settegast – North Houston**

**UTHealth-HCPC Part-time Forensic Psychologist**

**Faculty – Clinical Psychologists**

**Outpatient Psychiatrist – Adult Services at Rosenberg location**

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**Publications**

The role of the microbiota-gut-brain axis in neuropsychiatric disorders  
Jaqueline S Generoso, Vijayasree V Giridharan, Juneyoung Lee, Danielle Macedo, Tatiana Barichello

‘Meeting Kids Where They’re At’: Usability and Acceptability of a Substance Use and Sexual Risk Prevention Program via

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**In the news**

Pediatric experts Anson Koshy, MD; Melissa Goldberg, PsyD; and Michael Chang, MD; spoke to 10 reporters for the first-ever UTHealth virtual news conference.

Jennifer Hughes, PhD, was quoted in a LIVESTRONG article about how to process and cope with a breast cancer diagnosis.
Telemedicine for African American Girls
Cristina Lopez; Amanda Gilmore; Angela Moreland; Carla Danielson; Ron Acierno

Association of polychlorinated biphenyls and organochlorine pesticides with autism spectrum disorder in Jamaican children
MacKinsey A. Bach, Maureen Samms-Vaughan, Manouchehr Hessabi, Jan Bressler, Min Jae Lee, Jing Zhang, Syдонnie Shakespeare-Pellington, Megan L. Grove, Katherine A. Loveland, Mohammad H. Rahbar

Utility of a brief assessment of opioid demand among post-discharge trauma care patients
Yoon JH, Suchting R, Kessler D, Soder HE, Kapoor S, Stotts AL, Heads AM, Harvin JA, Green CE, Lane SD, Schmitz JM

Upcoming events

Save the Date
Feb. 6, 2021
12th Annual Psychiatry Update
Treatment Innovation for Veterans and First Responders
The Faillace Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences proudly invites you to the inaugural

2021 Houston Addiction Disorders Conference

April 9 and 10, 2021

Registration information coming soon

Join our mail list

We appreciate your donation!

Contact us

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