

# VA Annual Update for COM-T Spring GFM (2022)

John Kettelle, MD, FACS  
Chief of Staff

## Introduction

The Southern Arizona VA has had a successful collaboration with the University of Arizona for over 50 years.

As a reminder about our system, we are a 289 bed, Level 1b facility. We have 7 Community Based Outpatient Clinics, extending from Yuma to Casa Grande, to Green Valley and out to Safford.

Unlike many other communities, Tucson has seen sustained growth in the Veteran population. We have an enrolled patient population of over 59,000 Veterans and are currently growing by about 3000 unique patients per year.

# Modalities of Care for Veterans through the Pandemic

Use of Virtual Care modalities before and during COVID surge:

Modality of Care	October 2017 - Feb 2020	March 2020 - April 2021	May 2021 - April 2022
Face-to-Face (F2F) average	86%	55% (low 40%)	72%
Telephone average	10%	35% (peak 50%)	18%
VA Video Connect (VVC)	< 1%	6% (peak 9%)	5%
Other	> 3%	4%	5%

## Radiology

- Y-90 embolization procedure: Started in August 2020. One year inspection done in May 2021-Passed.
- Preoperative Botox injection for abdominal wall herniorrhaphy- Started March 2022
- Gallium PSMA for prostate cancer- started April 2022.
- Collaborative MRI research with UOA-in progress
- Cardiac MRI- started October 2021
- Stereotactic breast biopsies- in progress
- TAVR-CT- in progress. Protocol setup done. Siemens application specialist will come in first week of May to do some cases
- Lung cancer screening- in progress. Nurse navigator position filled. 0.5 FTE Body Imager Hired
- Radiology rotation for PGY-1 Ophthalmology- started July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021



## Women Veteran Program

- Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS) provides comprehensive primary care to women Veterans including mammography, maternity and breast care coordination, as well as a full-service gynecology with comprehensive services including, but not limited to birth control, infertility, and now minimally invasive gynecological robotic surgery
- The number of women Veterans enrolled at the end of FY 21 was 7735. Current enrollment is 8025 as of April 2022. There are 39 Women's Health designated Primary Care Providers and two board certified Gynecologist on staff.
- The Southern Arizona VA Women's Health Clinic is the home of a Regional Transgender E-Consult Team and Transgender/ Gender Diverse clinic.
- The Women's Health Clinic was successful in piloting the IVP program which offers a comprehensive assessment for Veterans at risk, or experiencing, relationship violence.
- In FY21, the Southern Arizona VA began the development of an innovative Urinary Incontinence program.

## Women Veteran Program Cont.

- Our Breast Imaging Center is in the same building as the Women's Health Clinic and can provide mammography diagnostics and screenings, as well as DEXA Scan screening for osteoporosis.
- The Southern Arizona VA has been awarded funds to develop a Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy Program, inclusive of biofeedback equipment and specialized Physical Therapist, who will be onboarding in May 2022.

## Mental Health

- Addiction Medicine Fellowship at 4 fellows and has filled for next year. SAVAHCS expanded Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) of Opioid Use Disorders (OUD). SAVAHCS is consistently #1 or 2 in the Nation within VA for treatment of OUD using MAT.
- Added PGY4 outpatient geropsych rotation in BHIP.
- Dr. Klugheit will be presenting at the poster session for the American Delirium Society on the SAVAHCS Delirium Protocol which has significantly increased the recognition/diagnosis of delirium and decreased the use of antipsychotics in patients with delirium in June.
- Received maximum APA accreditation for our Psychology Internship Program and Post-Doctoral Fellowship Program through 2031. We just went through the accreditation cycle and were awarded the maximum length between visits.
- VA SharkTank Semi-Finalists for the Quarterly MH Open House to bring Veterans who a service connected for MH diagnoses into MH care.
- MHS IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Action) Committee stood up and actively providing education and training.
- We hosted the first Annual Clinical Exams for psychiatry residents since the pandemic started

## Medicine and Subspecialties

- Rheumatology and the Medicine service are in the process of expanding Rheumatology telehealth services to Prescott.
- Rheumatology continues to support same day access (in contrast to 3-9 month wait in the community for an appointment).
- Rheumatology is participating in two industry sponsored psoriatic arthritis studies.
- VA Rheumatology has started a fellows Journal Club.
- Rheumatology started a novel 2 week elective for their fellows wherein the fellows rotate briefly with various specialties over two weeks – Ophthalmology, Podiatry, Dermatology, Neurology, Physiatry.
- ID collaborated with Nursing, Pharmacy, Informatics and Primary Care to open an infusion area dedicated to COVID treatments:
  - Administered monoclonal antibodies and remdesivir with patients with COVID 19.
  - Administered more Paxlovid (nirmeltravir/ritonavir) than many VISN facilities.
  - Administered more Evusheld (tixagevimab/cilgevimab) than all other VISN facilities.



## Medicine and Subspecialties Cont.

- Renal dialysis ranked 1 on the West Coast and 6 in the nation for dialysis quality measure [pre-COVID].
- Revitalized acute peritoneal dialysis program.
- Renal providers published 21 papers in peer reviewed journals over the past four years.
- Planning for Professor Tanriover to provider renal transplant expertise in bi-weekly clinic (one full day every pay period) starting in July.
- VA Dermatology is collaborating in the start of a Mohs fellowship.
- Medicine was invited and is pursuing participation in the CSP IMPACT trial for patients with prediabetes and established atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease.
- Endocrinology accepted the invitation to participate in the U of A first year medical students' summer research.
- Medicine supported the initiation of a multidisciplinary ALS clinic; 17 patients in the service since 3/2021. Reduced the episodes of care compared to pre-implementation cohort.
- Application for funding submitted to the Office of Rural Health for a home-based pulmonary rehabilitation program.

## Medicine and Subspecialties Cont.

- COPD C.A.R.E. program implemented 2021. (COPD Coordinated Access to Reduce Exacerbations). Winner VISN 22 Expo (VIE to Spread Best Practices) for Improving Veteran Access to COPD Care: Implementation of COPD CARE Model project.
  - 45.3% increase in practitioner visits within 14 days post-discharge.
  - 60.8% patients enrolled and followed in COPD CARE post-discharge.
  - Reduction in ED visit for enrolled patients.
- Anticipating Dr. Kwan Lee joining us as a fee basis provider to help support new VA interventional cardiology faculty.
- Dr. Lin serving two weeks annually at the University to enhance integration in Neurology.
- Started Tele-ICU services at SAVAHCS last year.
- Utilizing more virtual providers (a rheumatologist in Cincinnati, an oncologist in Seattle, and now a sleep medicine provider in Denver).
- Collaborating with the University on a hepatologist recruitment and on a cardiology chief recruitment. More preliminary collaboration on staff researcher recruitments in oncology and cardiology.

# Research

- SAVAHCS VA ORD research allocations are stable/slowly increasing despite the challenges of the pandemic
  - FY2020, \$2,132,235
  - FY2021, \$2,729,321
  - FY2022, \$2,690,050 to date, with additional \$180,000 expected in May or June 2022 for VA Brain Bank Biorepository
- SAVAHCS actively and effectively participated in VA Cooperative Studies Program (CSP) studies
  - Invited and pursuing participation in CSP#2002 “Investigation of Metformin in Pre-Diabetes on Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Outcomes Trial” (VA-Impact), PI Punit Goel MD
  - Invited and pursuing participation in CSP#2015 “Multicenter-Randomized, Double-blind Comparator Study of Antipsychotics Pimavanserin and Quetiapine for Parkinson’s Disease Psychosis”, PI Tanya Lin MD
  - On November 29, 2021, the SAVAHCS site of the “Million Veteran Program” (MVP), PI Paul Meyer MD, reached the 14,000 enrollment milestone. At current enrollment of 14,849, the SAVAHCS site is likely to meet the 15,000 milestone in a few months.
  - SAVAHCS participation in a total of in six VA CSP represents participation in 25% of active VA CSP.

## Research Cont.

- Five SAVAHCS researchers, all of whom are jointly appointed at University of Arizona, secured VA funding for ten VA grants. These included:
  - Dr. Natalie Scholpa, VA CDA-2
  - Dr. Jason Wertheim
    - 3 project grants, 2 Shared Equipment Evaluation Program (ShEEP) grants, including one for a 3D Nano Bioprinter, and funding to support summer VA research experience for University of Arizona medical students
  - Dr. Rick Schnellmann secured competitive renewal of one of his VA Merits, bringing his total of concurrent VA Merits to 3.
  - Dr. Gayatri Vedantam, competitive renewal of her Research Career Scientist award



## Research Cont.

- SAVAHCS participated in multiple key national VA programs
  - Million Veteran Program
  - Continued funding of the VA Brain Bank Biorepository, storing brains from deceased Veterans affected by ALS and Gulf War disease, PI Haining Zhu PhD
  - New VA Funding for VHA Biorepository, “VA Science and Health Initiative to Combat Infectious and Emerging Life-Threatening Diseases (VA SHIELD)”, currently focusing on samples from COVID-19 positive and comparator negative patients, PI Jason Wertheim MD; more recent approval of a prospective collection of samples through One Time Sweep of Existing Remainder Clinical Specimens and Data to Develop Assays, Laboratory Tests and Conduct Future Research on COVID-19, also under the leadership of PI Jason Wertheim MD.
  - “Expanded Access to Convalescent Plasma for the Treatment of Patients with COVID-19”, PI Chinh Nguyen MD
  - “A Phase 2 trial to Evaluate the Safety, Tolerability, and Preliminary Efficacy of Intravenous USB002 to Treat Patients with Respiratory Distress Due to COVID-19 Infection”, PI Adnan Abbasi MD
  - New funding for an ORD pilot Summer Research Program to enhance participation of students in VA research, PI Jason Wertheim MD

## Research Cont.

- Research Service hires/appointments/organizational changes to take SAVAHCS research program into the future.
  - May 2021, appointed new Research & Development Committee Chairperson with previous experience serving in this role at a larger VA facility: Jason Wertheim MD, renal transplant Merit and Presidential Awardee, Vice-Dean of Research Innovation at the University of Arizona.
  - May 2021, created the position of Grants Manager and hired Ms. Erika Matas to fill.
  - Hired a Budget Technician, Tricia Tetreault, to assist with purchasing to support VA research
  - July 2021, hired the capable and energetic Eric Glenn to serve as Administrative Officer to replace the retiring Administrative Officer
  - November 2021, hired Dawn Schwenke PhD, an experienced Chief of Research to replace an Acting Chief, augmenting political capital.
  - Added a permanent IRB Administrator to Research Service org chart and hired Claire Whipple to fill this position April 2022
  - Added four standard ORD approved research support positions to the ORD-funded component of the SAVAHCS org chart to allow rapid hiring into these support staff positions as needed to support further growth in VA funding.

## Research Cont.

- Welcomed new nine new investigators into the SAVAHCS research program as indicated by investigators newly initiating SAVAHCS research in the last two years. Dual SAVAHCS-University of Arizona faculty indicated by \*\*:
  - VA funded investigators
    - Jason Wertheim MD PhD, July 2020 (VA Merit) \*\*
    - Dr. Haining Zhu July 2021 (VA Merit) \*\*
    - Natalie Scholpa PhD August 2020 CDA-2 \*\*
  - Other funding/no funding
    - Brenton Roller DO December 2020 \*\*
    - Tania Lin MD April 2022 \*\*
    - Francesca Bryan-Couch MSN October 2021
    - Martin Weinand MD March 2021 \*\*
    - Sandesh Dev MD July 2021
    - Mark O'Cleireachain \*\*

## Research Cont.

- Operational Accomplishments
  - The ACOS/R&D developed and implemented a COVID-19 review strategy to mitigate issues of participant and staff safety to secure lifting of the administrative hold that VA ORD had placed on all active research projects with in-person visits in March 2020, allowing the facility to resume in-person research visits.
  - The Research Service implemented the ORD required version of IRBNet named VA Innovation and Research Review System (VAIRRS), modernizing the SAVAHCS protocol review system.
  - At continuing review, all human-subjects research protocols not required to be transitioned to the 2018 Common Rule were reviewed to determine if they could benefit from transitioning, and those that could benefit were transitioned.
  - Executed reliance agreements with non-VA IRBs, expanding opportunities for collaboration:
    - August 2020: Advarra IRB
    - August 2020: Western Institutional Review Board (WIRB)- Copernicus Group (WCG)



## Research Cont.

- Accomplishments to promote collaborations with UA
  - Secured BLR&D eligibility for Dr. John Streicher February 2022
  - SAVAHCS-University of Arizona partnership to provide University of Arizona medical students with paid summer research experience with SAVAHCS investigators: Funded by VA Office of Research & Development March 2022
  - With VA Office of General Council, identified conditions under which a faculty member dually appointed at University of Arizona and SAVAHCS may serve as PI of the same/similar research protocol at both University of Arizona and SAVAHCS.
- Increased integration of SAVAHCS and University of Arizona research programs
  - Percentages of active SAVAHCS investigators who have University of Arizona affiliations: May 2020-April 2021, 19 (46%) of a total of 41; April 2022, 20 (56%) of a total of 36.
  - Percentages of new or renewal WOC appointments that are for individuals with University of Arizona affiliations: 2020-2021, 6 (29%) of 21; current (including some in process), 16 (50%) of a total of 32.
  - Percentages of interagency personnel agreements that are for individuals with University of Arizona affiliations: 2020-2021, 10 (100%) of 10; current 15 (100%) of 15

## Construction Projects

- **2022**
  - IT infrastructure upgrades to support conversion to Cerner EHRM are ongoing.
  - Completed renovation of Pathology and Morgue areas.
- **2021**
  - The new Northwest Outpatient Clinic opened on December 15, 2021. The new clinic is 24,000 square feet total, increasing the clinical footprint from 10,000 to 15,000 square feet.
    - 9 Patient Aligned Care Teams
    - 77 VA health care providers and staff
    - 33 patient exam rooms
    - 3 patient consult rooms
    - 1 physical therapy consult room
    - Complete Clinical Laboratory with 3 blood draw stations
    - Classroom for patient education
    - Eligibility and enrollment office

## Construction Projects Cont.

- **2021 Cont.**

- Began construction on a Mental Health Clinic project to expand space by 7,617 square feet.
- Completed installation of four new patient imagers at the Main Hospital: replaced MRI, new Angiography IR Camera, Nuclear Medical Gamma Camera, and new Radiographic Fluoroscopy system.
- Saguaro PACT Primary Care Clinic remodel completed in April (11,250 square feet).

- **2020**

- Completed a large-scale refurbishment project for Nutrition and Food Services and Veteran Canteen Services (VCS) for a modern upgraded kitchen space in October.
- PACT II, Phase 2 (Specialty Care) construction was completed in May.



Value Excellence Team

VA



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health  
Administration

Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS)

Any questions contact: [John.Kettelle@va.gov](mailto:John.Kettelle@va.gov)

*Serving With Purpose, Passion & Pride*

Southern Arizona VA Health Care System (SAVAHCS) • 3601 South 6th Avenue • Tucson, Arizona 85723



 [www.facebook.com/VATucson](https://www.facebook.com/VATucson)

 Follow us on Twitter @TucsonVA

 [www.instagram.com/VATucson](https://www.instagram.com/VATucson)

[www.tucson.va.gov](https://www.tucson.va.gov)

[www.va.gov](https://www.va.gov)